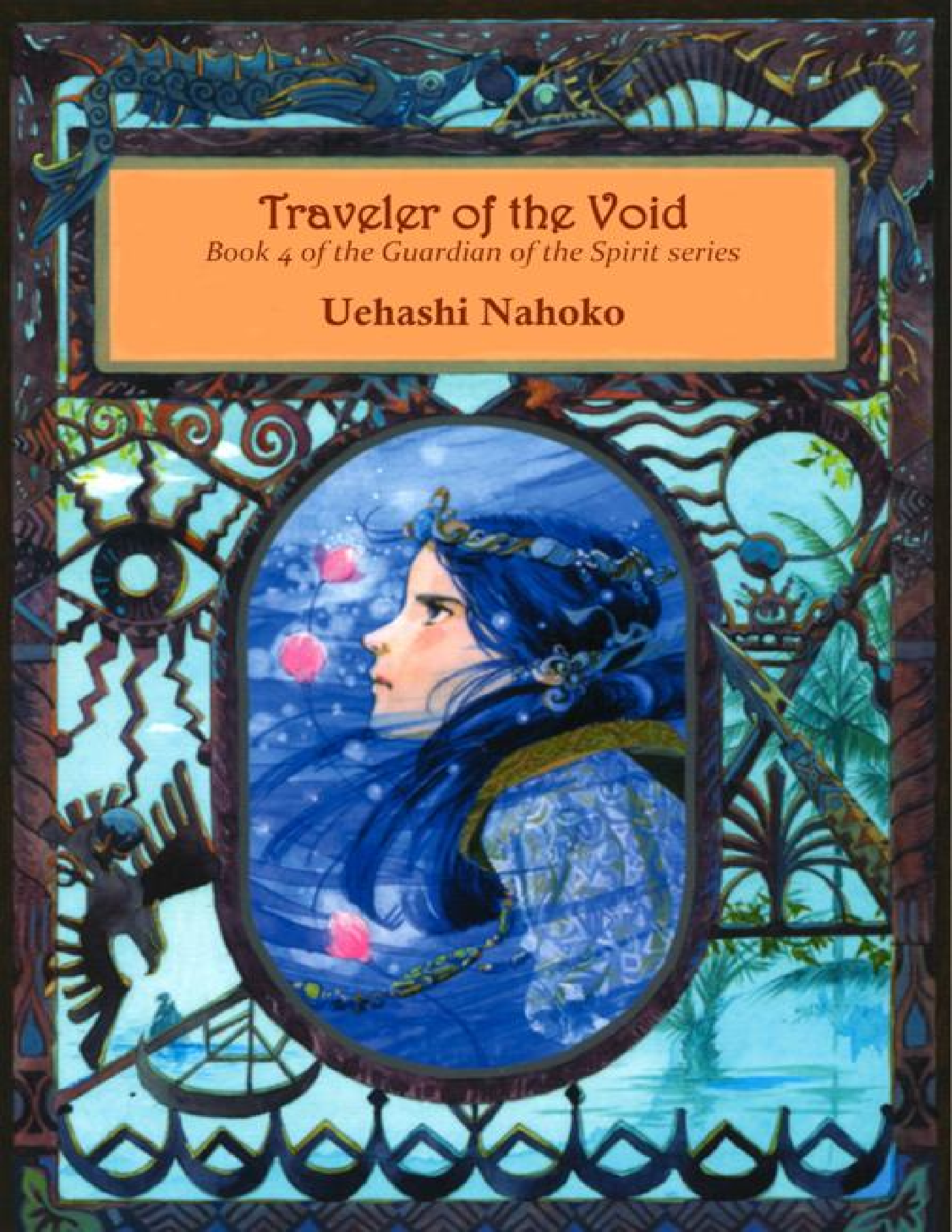
Traveler of the Void

Book 4 of the Guardian of the Spirit series

Uehashi Nahoko



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(Book 4 of the Guardian of the Spirit series)

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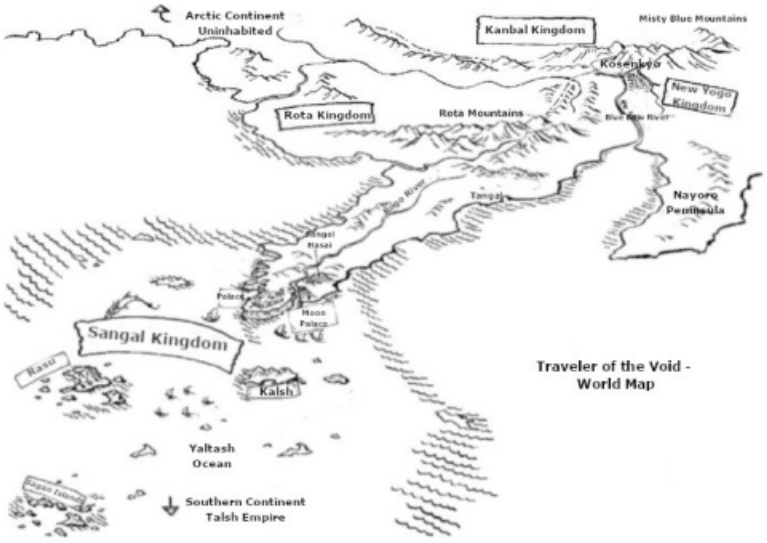

Traveler of the Void - World Map

Prologue

Chapter 1 -

The Girl Singing with the Wind

The wind was strong. In the night sky a half-moon had risen, the wind agitating the clouds in the sky high above. The wisps of cloud disappeared and appeared, appeared and disappeared again, as their shadows ran across the beach.

An old fisherman walked along the beach that night, white hair blown frenzied by the wind.

"The santarai must have called the wind," he said.

There had been a huge catch today. An especially large number of nets had been brought in full of the wind-calling fish, the santarai, gleaming like silver swords in the sun.

The new year had just begun, and along with it, the time of the santarai's breeding season. Usually, the santarai swam in the deep places of the ocean so that they wouldn’t be caught in fishermen's nets; they only swam close to shore during breeding time to lay their eggs along the rocky coast. There was nothing so delicious as a santarai with its stomach full of eggs.

It was customary for unusual or rare fish to be offered to the Guardian of the island first, before any of the fishermen. Santarai were the sole exception. They were considered a gift from the mother of the sea to the fishermen themselves; all fishermen of the island remembered and honored that gift every time they sat down for a meal. The arrival of the santarai was an event that the islanders looked forward to every year. The island's fishermen and their families all cooked santarai over roaring fires and held grand feasts.

Consequently, the old fisherman walking along the beach was in a pleasant mood. The smell of the santarai sizzling over coals lingered in his nostrils. The younger people of the island were still drinking merrily at the feast, but he had reached the point where he could no longer

drink another drop. At the same time, he'd realized that the wind had picked up suddenly and left the feast to investigate.

Tomorrow, the portion of the santarai to be given to the Island Guardian would be placed into the fishery at the western, rocky part of the island. The old man worried that the strong wind might blow away the traps set to ward off wild animals. If that happened, the santarai could be at risk of being devoured by beasts.

As the wind blew his white hair into his eyes, the old man suddenly stopped still. There was a little girl sitting on the beach. She sat facing the ocean, turning a vacant gaze on the sea.

Clouds raced across the sky. As the moon broke through the clouds, its light shone onto the upturned face of the girl sitting on the beach.

Eshana?

Eshana was the daughter of the old man's next door neighbor. Though she had just turned five that year, she had the mature attitude of an adult.

What on earth was she doing on the beach at this time of night?

The old man nearly called out to her, but he stopped himself. In the high wind, even a soft call would carry a far distance—and he did not want to interrupt Eshana. She was singing. Singing in a strange accent, in a language that the people of the island did not use.

"What on earth..."

Although the night was warm, the old fisherman felt goosebumps rise along his spine.

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"The wind's getting stronger."

The flames of the wax candles lighting the hall flickered and nearly went out. Servants hastily ran over to the hall's windows to cover them with screens to keep out the worst of the wind. The wind's howling suddenly became a distant sound. After a short time, the air in the hall

became oppressively humid. The servants left the hall to wait in better-ventilated rooms inside the palace until they were called.

Adol had only become Kalsh’s Island Guardian the year before last, after his father had passed away. He was a good-looking man, but his habitually shrewd and cunning expression worked against him. Despite his exalted position, he seemed more like a calculating merchant than a ruler.

The island was technically under the official sovereignty of the Sangal kingdom, but Adol could boast of being the Island Guardian of Kalsh by virtue of long tradition. The haughty gleam in his eyes was readily apparent.

Adol turned his gaze toward a delicate-looking man of middle years sitting in the chair for guests in front of him. The man wore loose clothing and a richly embroidered sash. He appeared to be some kind of merchant.

"Why have you come?" Adol asked.

The guest lifted his eyes and looked at Adol. "Lord Gail of the Nourmu archipelago has agreed to join our alliance."

Adol's eyebrows shot up. "Really? Hm, lord Gail...isn't he the one that's madly in love with his wife?"

The guest chuckled under his breath. "No matter how wise and beautiful they say she is, she's only a woman. No man in the world would be pleased to be governed by his wife."

Adol shook his head and offered his guest a bitter grin. "You’re clearly a foreigner. Though you may be familiar with how we live, you do not understand our hearts. In Sangal, a wise wife is a treasure to any man. This is true from the lowest peasant to the highest offices of court. The only difference is that all of our Island Guardians have ties to the royal family."

Adol’s own wife was currently absent from the palace. She had gone ahead of him to make preparations at the Moon Palace, Sangal Yasheera, for the coronation of Sangal's new king.

"I'm not saying Gail should divorce his wife or anything," the guest said. "Only that their social positions seem somehow reversed. If it's true that your royal wives are as wise and clever as you are, I imagine they'll come through any trial unscathed and find profit in it into the bargain. If you were matched against your wife in a battle of wits, you might lose—am I right?"

The guest smiled. Adol smiled back.

"It's difficult to say, but...I think it would be a close match. I'd be willing to give it a try."

The guest nodded in admiration. "That's the Sangal spirit. I've heard that your people are tough sailors and that you make tenacious merchants and strong-willed warriors. It seems this is indeed the case. The Sangal royal family read you wrong in just one matter: that by taking a wife, you could be controlled by her, instead of the other way around."

Adol opened his mouth to respond when the loud sound of a door slamming reverberated through the walls of the palace. Raised voices followed the sound. The sound of weeping was intermingled with the voices.

Adol stood up, crossed the hall quickly and opened the door.

"What's going on?" the guest asked.

Adol's servants were discussing something in hushed tones in the hall's adjoining room. Adol nodded at them and turned back to his guest. "Excuse me for a moment."

Adol left. The guest heard marching feet and doors opening and closing. After a few minutes, a deadly silence fell over the palace. The guest left his seat and drew his short sword, prepared to escape if that proved necessary.

Then the door of the hall opened, revealing Adol on the other side. His face was contorted in a frown.

"What's wrong?" the guest asked as she sheathed his sword.

As soon as Adol saw his guest, his expression changed to one of relief. "Ah...that was nothing to do with what we were talking about.

Please put your mind at ease."

The guest frowned. "But what's happening out there? You seem flustered and unlike yourself."

"It's difficult to explain. It seems that something unusual has happened on one of the islands near here."

Adol resumed his seat and faced his guest. "Your country also faces the sea, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well then, I'm sure you've heard the same kind of story before. It's an old legend, passed down through the generations. It goes something like this: at the bottom of the Yaltash ocean, there is another world called Nayugul, where a people called the Nayugul Raita live."

The wind howled, shaking the screens over the windows. Faintly and more distantly, they could just make out the sound of the rumbling sea.

"The people of Sangal are an ocean people. But of course, we don't live *in* the ocean. The people of Nayugul, the Nayugul Raita, cannot possibly live above water, either. Our two peoples live separately, in peace...but it seems that, from time to time, the Nayugul Raita take a peek above the surface of the water."

The guest's eyebrows furrowed together. "Above...the surface? Then the Nayugul Raita are capable of crawling out of the ocean?"

"No, no, nothing like that. They suck out the soul of a human and inhabit their body," Adol said. "There are many five-year-old girls in the world, but this is the first time I've ever heard of one that does nothing but stare into space and sing songs in an unknown language. On top of that, this girl does not eat, does not sleep, and behaves like a puppet being manipulated by strings.

"I don't know how long this has been going on. It reminds me of something I heard once from the head priest of the Sangal temple. He had a prophetic dream that he took as a message from a god. He said: 'A child will become the eyes through which the Nayugul Raita will view

the human world. If they see that the human world is evil, they will destroy it.'

"The priest called the child the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita."

The guest leaned forward. "How strange. What will happen to this child?"

"The Nayugul Raita are also called the children of the mother of the sea. They serve the goddess that grants the Sangal people the riches of the ocean: riches like fish, salt, pearls and shells. If the Nayugul Raita *are* the servants of this goddess and they discover that the human world is evil, they could relay this message to the goddess, and we could be destroyed.

"The head priest of the Sangal temple counseled the King in this way: 'Show respect to the mother of the sea. Accept the guidance of your court. But under no circumstances must you reveal the impurity of the human world to the messenger of the goddess.'

"In order to fulfill these requirements, the child that becomes the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita must be brought immediately to Sangal's royal court, where she can be sheltered and protected. The child must receive the very best hospitality and see only the best of what our world has to offer. After that, she must return to the sea."

"Return to the sea?"

"We will hold a ceremony to bring the girl's soul into harmony with her body, then drop her off of Hosorou cape into the ocean."

The guest now understood why he'd heard weeping earlier. The people crying had probably been the girl's family.

"And so, what happened just now...is that because the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita has appeared?"

"Yes. It's so sudden that it's hard to believe. It's the first time in my life I've ever encountered a situation like this...but for all that, the reports I receive seem to align closely with our nation's ancient legends."

The guest regarded him with a penetrating stare that cut right through to Adol's innermost thoughts. Adol's face twisted in a grimace.

His guest narrowed his eyes.

"Is the child someone you know?"

"No. She is the daughter of a fisherman. Her father was the most famous diver on the island. He died at sea, but while he lived, he was the master of Prince Tarsan's divers."

Adol noticed his guest's eyes widen. "You may not know, but this island, though small, is widely considered to be the original homeland of the royal family," he said. "It has been traditional in our country to raise the first son of the royal family in the city, where he can receive an education befitting his rank, while sending the second son here to train as a fisherman. Because of this custom, my wife's younger brother, Prince Tarsan—who is like my own brother—was raised on this island. Unlike me, he loves to fish." Adol's tone was faintly tinged with scorn.

"I wonder sometimes if he would have been happier being the simple son of a fisherman. He's been obsessed with diving to catch deep-water fish since he was a child. The girl we have spoken of, he cherishes as he would a younger sister. He even made her a ring out of seashells. When he finds out what has happened to her...well, you can imagine his distress."

"Hm." The guest tapped his chin, momentarily lost in thought. "So, now that the girl has been brought here, don't you need to escort her to the royal court?"

Adol sighed heavily. "It seems that way."

"How many days should it take to reach the capital?" This question came out faster than the first, almost suspiciously so. An unusual light shone in the guest's eyes.

Adol thought this change in demeanor odd, but he answered him without hesitation. "I don't think it should take more than five days. Once all preparations are made here, I daresay we could make the journey in three. I will be attending the coronation ceremony. It's considered proper to observe all twenty days of the ceremony, but even if we're delayed, I imagine it wouldn't cause much of a problem if I was a day or so late."

At that moment, the door to the hall opened again, bringing with it a cacophony of voices.

"It seems she's here," Adol said. "Excuse me."

Adol stood up from his chair, as did his guest.

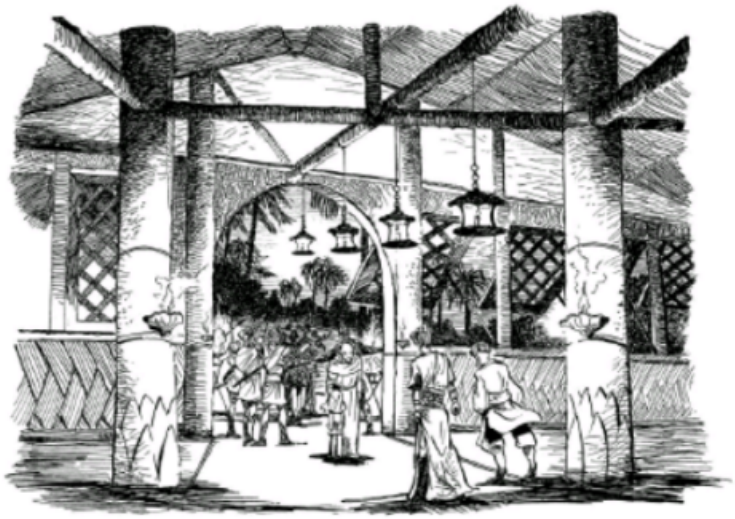
"I have no wish to interfere with your plans, but I would like to see this child that has become the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita, if possible," the guest said. At Adol's worried frown, he continued, "You may have forgotten, but I have some small knowledge of magic. If I reach out and touch her soul, I may be able to determine if she really has become one of the Nayugul Raita, or if she is simply suffering from some mental illness."

"That may be so, but the priests and islanders have eyes. If your identity is suspected..."

The guest simply smiled. "Don't worry on that account. I promise not to do anything that will make the priests or the islanders suspicious of me."

Adol hesitated, but finally nodded. "All right, then. You can see her."

Adol felt a strong gust of wind as he and his guest left the hall. Sangal's palaces had been built to allow the wind to pass through them no matter how many windscreens were used. With their hair blowing behind them in the warm, damp air, the Island Guardian and his guest entered a dim, narrow entrance hall. As their footsteps echoed across the hard floor of the hall, they encountered a mixed group of fishermen and soldiers.



In the center of the clutch of people stood a young girl with a priest grasping her arm and a white cloth covering her face. For all that she was surrounded by people, she seemed somehow isolated and alone. She appeared very much like a fisherman's daughter: aside from her head covering, she wore nothing but a loincloth; sand ground between the toes of her deeply suntanned feet.

Temporarily shedding his haughtiness, Adol crouched down and offered the child his greetings. "I welcome you and thank you for coming. Please enjoy my hospitality until the day you return to your own home."

It was not clear if the girl had heard him or not. She stood there, straight as a stick, unmoving and unresponsive.

Adol's guest took one step closer to the girl, reaching out hesitantly toward the cloth that covered her head.

"You must not remove the cloth," the priest holding the girl's arm snapped at him.

The guest smiled reassuringly at the priest and nodded. "Please don't worry. I don't intend to remove the cloth. I merely wondered if a humble foreign guest might also offer his greetings to the messenger of the goddess of the sea?"

The guest had a slighter build than any of the islanders, but he possessed an unusually intimidating presence. Everyone suddenly fell silent and watched the stranger attentively.

After a pause, the priest nodded reluctantly.

The guest extended his hand and placed it gently on top of the girl's head. He closed his eyes. The girl did not so much as twitch in reaction.

"Sir, have you finished giving your greetings?" the priest asked.

The guest blinked as if coming out of a trance and turned his attention to the priest. He looked as though he wanted to ask something, but seemed unsure of what to say.

"Huh? What... Oh, um, yes. Thank you." The guest bowed before the assembled people and stepped back, away from the girl.

The priest regarded him with an uncomprehending gaze, but then composed his features. "Island Guardian and lord of Kalsh, please show our honored guest the finest hospitality," he said.

Abruptly, Adol shifted his line of sight from his guest to the divine messenger. "But of course. Attendants, please guide our esteemed guest to her rooms. I entrust you with drawing her a bath and preparing linens so that she is comfortable. You two soldiers—you, and you there—I will assign as guards."

As soon as he stopped speaking, the islanders in the room let out strained cries of grief.

"Don't cry," Adol said. "I understand your pain. It grieves me as well. But there is nothing that can currently be done. Please be brave. I expect that the King will offer the girl's family a pension and security so that they will never go hungry."

Eshana's mother collapsed to the floor in tears. The people of the island surrounded her, seeking to console her grief. As her mother looked on, two female attendants approached Eshana, each taking a hand as they began leading her to her rooms.

Eshana's mother gathered her courage and called out, "Eshana! Eshana!"

But Eshana didn't even look back. She went docilely to her rooms, led by the attendants.

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Just after midnight, the two guards at the door of the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita heard a faint, but repeated, sound. It was so soft that at first neither one of them was sure that they'd heard it. It almost sounded like something colliding with the outside wall—something blown into the wall by the strong wind.

As they listened, trying to identify the sound, an irresistible sleepiness came over the guards. They nodded off where they stood. Inside the guest chambers, the attendants entrusted to watch over the child also heard the faint not-quite-there sound and fell into a deep sleep shortly after.

So none of them so much as glimpsed the shadow of the person that sneaked into the guest rooms in the middle of the night, nor was there anyone to notice that two people left those rooms shortly after. The guards and attendants slept, obliviously, until morning.

Chapter 2 -

Rassharou - The Sea Drifters

The ship lurched hard to the left all of a sudden, making a dozing Surina open her eyes wide. She could see the shadows of her father and younger brother in the dark. Her brother was still sleeping.

"What happened?" Surina whispered to her father.

Her father looked over at her with surprise. "You're awake?"

They had caught a huge catch of santarai that day to sell for feasts on the island of Kalsh. Their ship had found harbor on the western inlet of the island. When they'd docked, they'd heard laughter, singing, and happy raucous wild parties, but sometime in the night the mood of the festivities had completely changed.

Surina and her family were not islanders. She'd been born aboard ship and spent most of her life on the sea; she expected she'd die at sea as well. Such was the life of a Rassharou, one of Sangal's nomadic sea drifters.

Because the Rassharou lacked a defined home or homeland, the islanders considered them as lesser citizens than themselves. And it was true that the Rassharou had no home other than their boats. They also had no approved sanction by the Island Guardians to engage in trade. This meant the Rassharou had to sell their goods for cheap and acquire their own necessities more expensively—or risk the ire of the islanders and their Island Guardians.

But the Rassharou were not discontented with their lot. They paid no taxes, unlike the islanders. They didn't ever have to hold their nose and tolerate living among people they despised. Pushing off, hoisting sail and crossing the sea with their close-knit families seemed a decent enough existence. Certainly, from their own perspective, no more comfortable way of life existed.

In their hearts, the Rassharou considered themselves the Taora Yaltash Na: the true people of the sea. The islanders, especially the adult men, they sometimes considered brothers of the sea—Yaltash Shuri. But the Rassharou mainly considered islanders as Takka Dorura —island people.

To be Rassharou was to know the ocean deeply and well, even out to seemingly impossible distances. It was to navigate constantly between the islands of Sangal's archipelago, learning the secrets of the sea. The Rassharou knew more secrets about the ocean than the islanders could ever imagine. That was their great source of pride.

Despite this, the Rassharou did not spend *all* their time at sea. Most Rassharou people, finding an island to their liking, would linger on or near that island for perhaps six months out of a year. Surina's family was on good terms with the people of Kalsh, so they spent about half of each year swimming and fishing with the island's people. Although her mother had passed away earlier that year, her family's custom of splitting time between the sea and the island had not changed.

After her mother's death, Surina continued to sail the seas with her father, her ten-year-old brother Rashi, and her two-year-old sister Racha, but it had all felt unusually lonely. They had only recently returned to Kalsh to live and work among the others on the island for a while.

Whenever Surina’s family docked on Kalsh, the islanders showed them nothing but kindness. Today they’d offered her family three shares of santarai and invitations to their feasts, but they had declined. The wind had carried the sounds of merrymaking toward their ship, but Surina hadn’t felt any desire to join the party. She’d stretched out comfortably on her sleeping pallet, lulled by the sound of singing voices.

But then the singing had been interrupted, becoming disjointed before turning into wailing. The wailing was a lonely sound like the echo of a whistle moving across the smooth waters of the sea.

The change in the feast's mood worried Surina and her family. Her father whispered to her to wake the younger children. "We will leave the island at dawn," he said. "A Shigul Nasoi Ra has appeared."

The Rassharou held their own festivals, much as the islanders did. According to the legends of their people, Rassharou children that became enthralled by the music at these festivals ran the risk of having their souls stolen and sent to the very bottom of an otherworldly ocean called the Other Sea. Once there, the children's souls would forget all sense of time and place and never return to their bodies on land. Children that suffered this fate were called Shigul Nasoi Ra, the children of the Other Sea.

A Shigul Nasoi Ra was called the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita by the islanders, but to the Rassharou, the idea that the spirit of a Nayugul Raita would just crawl into the body of a helpless child was unthinkable.

"We must sail to the confluence of the Sararou and Nogura currents immediately," Surina's father said. "Mother of the sea, I offer thanks! Being in Kalsh tonight to receive this news is a gift of providence.

"While the rumor of the Shigul Nasoi Ra spreads to the other islands, we'll have time to turn a huge profit. We'll stop by Nash to gather our family and friends and tell them the good news. We're going to be rich!" Her father's tone was brightly energetic.

The Rassharou held many secrets among themselves. One of these was that at the appearance of a new Shigul Nasoi Ra, a huge school of jagou fish would appear at the conflux of the Sararou and Nogura currents. Jagou were a fish even more delicious than santarai. Their bones glowed in the dark. Because of this, and because they were deep-water fish, they could usually only be fished at night; the difficulty of catching them and their rare flavor meant that they always sold for a high price. If they could use this opportunity to catch a lot of jagou, they might indeed become as rich as her father hoped.

Surina beamed with joy, but then she thought of something. "Dad, who is the child that's become the Shigul Nasoi Ra?"

Her father looked at her without speaking. Surina held her breath and hoped that her terrible premonition was wrong.

"It was Eshana," he said. "It's...unfortunate."

Surina sucked in a breath. Eshana! Calm, sweet Eshana... Surina loved her like a little sister. When she realized the Shigul Nasoi Ra was Eshana, her former happiness vanished in an instant.

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For three days after leaving Kalsh, their journey was blessed with fair winds.

"Can you see the current?" Surina's father called out from the helm. "Look closely at the sea. I expect you'll notice the current's movement if you look for it."

Sitting at the helm, Surina's father nimbly adjusted the sail to take better advantage of the wind. He lifted his hand above his eyes to block out the harsh light of the sun and focused his vision. His suntanned face was covered in deep wrinkles. He called out to the ten-year-old Rashi and taught him about the current.

"The color there is a bit different," he said. "Can you see it?"

Surina painted her face with a sunscreen of pulverized seaweed and half-listened to her father talk. No matter which island they sailed from, the deep untrammeled blue of the open ocean always revealed when they had come far from easy reach of land.

But the ship was not defenseless. To her right were two ships, and to her left three more: companion vessels all sharing the same goal. This was a fleet helmed by Surina's uncles. Thanks to them, there was no need to fear being attacked by pirates this far from shore.

The conflux of the Sararou and Nogura currents was not so very far away. Thanks to the winds that had blessed their journey thus far, they might reach their destination by sunset.

Surina's little sister Racha was asleep in her arms, breathing deeply. Two ships had drawn in close to theirs, so their position in the

fleet was fixed, stable, and safe. Despite this reassurance, their vessel seemed like nothing more than a leaf trembling alone in the vastness of the empty ocean, waves drifting in as the sail flapped in the wind.

Racha and her little brother Rashi had both suffered from seasickness that morning. They hadn't gotten used to the open water yet. But as the day had gone on, the two children seemed to forget that they had ever been seasick.

Surina leaned against the side of the boat and turned her face to the sea. She felt the sudden sensation of something grazing across her face and dropped her gaze to the surface of the water.

She didn't see anything strange, but soft breezes pushed up from the sea spray and tickled her skin. It was as if the ocean had lifted up a newborn and placed it onto the boat, and now that newborn was breathing on Surina's face.

She also realized that she could hear something. It wasn't the sound of the waves or the sound of her uncles' ships buffering them against the sea. Riding on the wind, a mysterious whispering echoed across the water.

It couldn't be...the song of the Shigul Nasoi Ra?

A chill went down Surina's spine. She hurriedly drew herself back from the side of the ship.

"This is a fantastic breeze," her father said happily. "Almost like it's pushing us exactly where we want to go."

"Dad," she called out in a trembling voice.

Her father turned to face her. She struggled to calm herself down. "Dad, is the wind a child born from the sea?"

"Why would you ask something like that?"

Surina explained to her father what she had just experienced along the side of the boat. After listening to her, her father gazed out at the sea, intently staring for a time before shaking his head.

"I can't hear anything. I can't sense any child of wind, either."

Her father smiled and looked at Surina. "You are so much like your mother. She was a wind reader. Sometimes, she'd be able to tell me when the wind was about to switch directions. 'In a little while, the wind will blow from the south.' That sort of thing."

As he said this, Surina remembered that her mother had indeed said things like that, often. As she recalled her mother's soft voice, the pain of loss welled up within her, rendering her mute with a feeling like fear.

"Let's see...about your question before, I think you could kind of consider the wind to be like a child born from the sea. Just like the Shigul Nasoi Ra, children singing at the bottom of the sea, there are also Su Kon Ra, children born of the wind. Similarly, the santarai are the wind-calling fish, and the jagou are the wind-lured fish—fish that are invited to come out by the wind that the santarai call.

"Think of it like this: whenever a Shigul Nasoi Ra appears, so does a huge school of jagou, right in the spot we are traveling to. It's like the Shigul Nasoi Ra gives birth to the wind, which in turn causes the jagou to appear."

"I wonder if the wind was Eshana."

"Maybe that's so. Poor girl. If she's becoming a child of the wind, she might do better to blow back to her own body before it gets dropped into the ocean." He paused. "You know your mother and I loved Eshana dearly. We often ate together with her and Yata..."

An image of Surina's mother floated up before her eyes. She wanted to see her mother so badly that it ached. Suddenly, overwhelming feelings of love for her father, her brother, and her sister welled up inside her uncontrolled. She prayed fervently that they would be allowed to live together for a long time in peace and happiness.

As the light of sunset spread across the horizon, Surina and her family arrived at the place where the cold Sararou current met the warm Nogura current. A huge number of birds whirled and swooped overhead and dived into the water—so many, it was hard to tell if some were real or imaginary, like figures in an optical illusion. Her father and

Rashi let out cheers. Surina looked out at what had made them shout for joy.

Many rivers flowed into the ocean. The jagou were carried here by of one of these rivers. Surina gazed at the huge school of fish below their ships, their spines glowing in the half-dark. It was the largest school of fish she'd ever seen. Ensconced in the warm Nogura current, the jagou swam together, occasionally spiraling in and out of the connected Sararou current.

Surina felt the wind blow her hair back directly from her face. The wind didn’t come from the direction of the sail; it seemed to come up directly from the ocean, carrying with it a mysterious echo of the song she'd heard before. This wind must have come from Nayugul and the Other Sea. As she listened to the echoes of that song, the clamoring of the birds and the cheering voices of her father and brother vanished from her awareness, so that only the song was left in her heart.

Then she realized something strange. As the wind from Nayugul passed over them, an ordinary sea breeze followed just after, as if the ordinary wind was trying to engage the wind from Nayugul in a game of tag.

"Dad, the wind's blowing from the southeast."

Just as Surina called out, the direction of the wind shifted—to the southeast, as she'd said. Her father hurriedly adjusted the sails. Then he looked at her with his eyebrows raised and laughed.

Cheers rose from her uncles' ships. She wondered if they'd be able to catch the whole school of jagou with one throw of the nets. Not just that: she also wondered if it might be dangerous to draw in all the nets, full, at one time. Such a catch might be heavy enough to sink their ships. When she said these thoughts aloud, her father and uncles only seemed to get more excited.

The ships cast their nets and set the pole fishers to work. Together with her friends and family, Surina started bringing in the catch. As jagou fell wriggling to the deck, Rashi screamed and cried and poked the fish with sticks until they were still. Surina joined her cousins as

they hurriedly scooped fish out of full nets and pulled the empty nets all the way back up to the deck before casting them out again.

By the time the sun had completely set, every ship in the fleet was practically buried in jagou.

"Where will we sleep?" Surina asked.

Rashi stared down at the deck with a dumbfounded expression. Surina's father appeared exhausted, standing hunched with fish piled up past his ankles. "We...might have caught too much."

The next day, the work of boning and drying their catch went on continuously from sunup until past noon. Surina washed the bones of the jagou in salt water, then wrapped them together with string, using extra care not to cut her hands on the sharp pieces. She worked almost constantly and in silence.

When fatigue overcame her, she snacked on fresh slices of jagou that were rich with delicious oils even after she'd rinsed them in seawater. The tang of the salt drew out the sweetness in the flesh of the fish. The savory aftertaste lingered in her mouth.

"Jagou are so tasty!"

When the work was finished, the fleet of ships, all full to bursting with processed jagou, adjusted course for the nearest market. Everyone was in high spirits. They'd undoubtedly be able to sell their catch for a high price.

"With all the money this will bring in, I could probably buy a new ship," Surina's father said brightly. From here, the nearest market on Rasu island was a two-day journey in good weather. If the wind turned toward the north, though, they'd need to be careful not to get blown off-course. They had to use care to keep their catch in the freshest possible condition until they reached Rasu.

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While rounding the cape of an uninhabited island, tragedy struck.

It was near sunset. The island before them was barely visible and shrouded in blue mist. Surina's uncle Sago's ship, along with another uncle's ship, were tacking a bit behind her father's. From some distance away, she saw her uncle Sago's ship skillfully round the tip of the the island's cape.

But as her uncle's ship began to turn toward her father's vessel, Surina heard raised voices. She looked on in confusion as her uncle was blown forcibly off the deck of his ship and into the water with a huge splash.

Surina and her family leaned over their ship's guardrails, trying to see what had happened.

Perhaps she'd just imagined it, but she thought she'd seen a bright light shine over her uncle's shoulders just before he'd fallen into the water. The moment that thought crossed her mind, the shadow of a huge red ship came into view beyond the cape.

The ship rounded the cape and came closer, revealing an enormous prow and a red hull that bordered on gold in the low light of evening. A Sangal merchant ship. It was not really so huge as ships went, but it was at least ten times the size of Surina's family's vessel.

Along the sides of the merchant vessel, Surina made out the shadows of soldiers standing in rows. The metal tips of their arrows gleamed in the light of the setting sun.

The wind blew fiercely. Surina heard the tight-wound sounds of the merchant ship as it strained to move against the wind's direction.

And then, she heard her uncle scream.

The Sangal merchant ship was attacking them—but why?

"Jump into the water!" her father yelled. He was as stiff and still as if he'd turned to ice. Rashi clung to his legs; he peeled him off and hoisted him up into his arms before tossing him overboard.

Then he rushed over to Surina, taking Racha from her arms before slapping her with an open palm.

"Don't freeze! Jump!" His gaze flicked from Racha back up to her.

Thunk. The sound of something hitting the ship. *Thunk thunk thunk.*

Arrows.

One by one, the arrows connected to the side of the ship, piercing its hull.

"Jump! Don't think about us! Only think about saving yourself!"

The enemy merchant vessel drew steadily closer. Arrows fell like rain around them. Surina and her father instinctively flinched and ducked their heads.

Her father groaned softly. When Surina finally lifted her head to look at him, there was an arrow in his shoulder. Trembling, Surina grasped her father's shoulder and attempted to pull the arrow out, but her father pushed her away. Racha was crying as if a fire had broken out.

"Jump," her father commanded. "Dive deep into the water, deep enough for the arrows not to reach you, then swim to the islands. Only you can save yourself!"

Surina choked back a sob, but forced herself to stand up straight. Then she kicked off the deck and jumped into the cold sea. Freezing water slammed into her face like a slap. She didn't dive, but poked her head carefully out of the water, then moved in the direction of her brother, who was crouched on the ship's hull.

"Leave us! Dive! Get away!" Her father's shout echoed in her ears. She heard the whizzing of another volley of arrows above her head.

Surina took a deep breath, then dived.

She wondered if she'd be able to take enough breaths to keep swimming if she stayed submerged deep enough to avoid the arrows. No matter how skillfully or deeply she dived, she doubted she'd be able to make it all the way to the islands just by swimming. And if she miscalculated and surfaced in a dangerous spot, she'd be fodder for the archers.

In order to avoid the detection of the archers, she would have to swim a farther distance than they might guess before she tried to surface.

At that moment, Surina remembered that she could ride the current—if she could find it—and swim much faster than the enemy ship would think. It was a gamble; she might wind up dying hopelessly far from any shore. Many people before her had been involuntarily

sucked into currents and died that way. She and the other Rassharou children had always been cautioned to avoid currents when swimming, but now she thought to try entering one deliberately—to cross a longer distance in a shorter amount of time.

I won't swim toward the islands, she thought. *Any inhabited islands I know of are too far for me to reach just by swimming. And besides, the soldiers will assume I'd swim toward the islands.* She would assume it if she were them.

Still under the water, Surina began swimming in earnest, seeking out the current with her whole body. After swimming for just a short distance, she felt a strong pull and deliberately slipped herself into the flow of the current.

It was a miracle that she'd escaped so far with her life. She was certain that the soldiers would be on the lookout for her between her family's ships and the Sangal islands, but she doubted they'd think to look for her on an uninhabited island far from her family or any people.

She broke the surface of the water for air. In the distance, she could just make out the huge merchant vessel towing five smaller ships behind it on lines. She could not tell if her father or any of her family still lived.

Surina watched the merchant vessel shift direction toward the opposite side of the cape. Then, still crying, she swam in long overhand strokes toward the uninhabited island.

Part One

Chapter 1 - On the Hill of the Full Moon - Sangal Hasai

Chagum felt the wind on his skin as light filtered into the oxcart. Someone lifted the blinds from the outside.

"Excuse me, Crown Prince. We have arrived at Sangal Hasai." The guide's voice trembled slightly. He kept his eyes fixed downward so as not to gaze on the royal visage and spoke in a voice so quiet it was difficult to make out his words.

From outside the cart, the sound of cloth flapping in the wind was audible. Chagum's servants were spreading out a cloth for him to walk upon. In the confined space of the cart, Chagum carefully stirred his stiff limbs to movement and prepared to take his first step out of the cart. If he was an ordinary person, he'd be permitted to trip over his numb feet and even stumble a little without worrying that his people would take it as a bad omen.

The moment he straightened to his full height to take in the view outside the cart, he gasped reflexively. From where he stood to as far as his eyes could see was an endless expanse of ocean. Sangal Yasheera, the Moon Palace, was also in his sight line, nestled in the delta at the mouth of the Taiga river, rising like coral from a sea bed.

"Is that...?" Chagum asked, feeling sincere admiration for the beauty of the scenery before him.

The capital of Sangal had accumulated many poetic names over the years, chief among them the City of Coral and the Gem Floating on the Waves. Viewing the city from the top of the cape, the city resembled nothing so much as a series of interweaving multicolored coral branches. Chagum wondered what material the cape was made of, to make the construction of such a city possible. The ground of the cape was mostly peach in color, mingled with white streaks. The houses that

he could see lined up along the shore were the same delicate white color as shellfish.

Four enormous towers, one at each corner of the royal palace, were clearly visible from this height. Each was formed in the shape of a tipped spiral shell. The walls and roofs of the palace were made of shell ceramic tile, famous in Sangal for its beauty and durability. Sunlight reflected off the tile, making the entire palace glow with soft illumination.

The deep blue waves of the ocean contrasted against the shimmering white of the palace and the buildings surrounding it, all set against the backdrop of the faintly peach-colored cliffs. It truly did seem like a city of coral that had risen from the sea.

He noticed someone standing near him. Without looking his way, Chagum said, "It's beautiful. Isn't it, Shuga?"

Shuga nodded. "It most certainly is." Shuga narrowed his eyes and looked up at the sky. "This is the best place possible to read the stars, right here. The sea breeze feels wonderful."

Chagum turned to face his counselor and teacher, the young Star Reader Shuga, and smiled.

"You're the son of a fisherman, aren't you?" Chagum asked. "Do you remember your home when you look out at the sea?"

Shuga's sternly serious face softened into a grin. "Yes...but the color of the sea is different where I'm from. Look at that! A city built around the base of the cliffs, near a riverbed. Crescents of white sand to the east and west, and the color of the sea near shore is a pale green. The sand in my home village is closer to gray than white, and the blue of the sea is much deeper there."

Chagum's eyes tracked the features of the landscape that Shuga pointed out to him. It was indeed the first time he'd ever seen that semi-transparent turquoise color so close to the shore of the ocean.

Chagum squinted, enjoying the warmth of the sun on his face. "The sun is so bright here. The blue of the sky and the blue of the sea are different in New Yogo. I never thought that even things like that would be different in a country bordering ours." He paused. "The world is a magnificent place."

"It most certainly is."

"...magnificent, but also huge. It took twelve days from our border to get here. Sangal's marine transport and marine products have definitely left an impression on me, and it seems the people cultivate fields, too."

Shuga's smile deepened. His duties involving Prince Chagum had mainly concerned teaching, study, and research for the past three years. Every time he had the chance to observe the workings of Chagum's obviously keen mind, he became happy beyond words.

I must make sure he is the next Mikado. I must protect him from anything that might make him stray from that path.

The year before, the Third Queen had given birth to a precious son.

Up until that point, Chagum had been the Mikado's only surviving son, a fact that had protected his status as Crown Prince. But as soon as the new prince had been born, the sentiment had spread that now, at least, if the eldest son were lost, there was a spare.

The Mikado was a cold unfeeling man with no real feelings of paternal affection for his children. In his mind's eye, Shuga could easily hear the Mikado say something like, "Feelings of paternal affection are a useless quality in a Mikado." And if it were even suggested to the Mikado that he might behave in a way contrary to his character, the suggester might find themselves thrown out—or disinherited.

And the Crown Prince had been disinherited once. His life had been threatened by secret plots to make him die of an illness or an accident—all orders given to the Mikado's Hunters, eight assassins that received commands from the Mikado in his Hidden Hall. Shuga remembered those times well, as did Chagum.

Chagum had undergone the uniquely unprecedented experience of hosting the egg of a spirit from Nayugu in his body. When the Mikado had learned of this egg's existence inside his son, he had ordered him assassinated in order to protect the purity of his bloodline's reputation.

Hounded by assassins and pursued by devouring spiritual beasts that desired to consume the egg within him, the eleven-year-old Chagum had been only narrowly rescued by Balsa, the female bodyguard and spear wielder. Balsa, along with her childhood friend the herbalist Tanda and Tanda's master, the magic weaver Torogai, had worked together to save the prince's life.

Shuga had also received orders from the Mikado to cooperate on the matter of the assassination of Chagum. But, moved to protect the boy, he had ultimately switched allegiances.

In any event, would-be murderer or not, the Mikado was still Chagum's father, and was legally considered as such. If his older brother Sagum had not passed away of a sudden illness, it was possible that the Mikado's assassins might be pursuing Chagum still. At the loss of his firstborn, the Mikado had made use of Chagum to fulfill his need for an heir.

The Mikado is heartlessly cruel, living divorced from the feelings that bind a parent to a child...only thoughts of his position move his heart.

Once, Shuga had been commanded by the Mikado to wrap Chagum head-to-toe in silk thread to prevent him from being corrupted by the nearness of those of the common class. From birth, the person that was to become the Mikado was treated as a living god. They were secluded in the innermost chambers of the palace and lived an existence in which they rarely so much as touched another person. Being raised in such a way, it was really no surprise that the hearts of the common people and the heart of the Mikado were so different.

But through a strange whim of fate, Chagum had briefly escaped the confines of a future Mikado's upbringing. He had ventured out into the chaotic world and become familiar with how people other than himself lived their lives. More than that, he had formed strong

emotional attachments to people that had changed him forever. Bright, kind Chagum, with a secret fire shining out from his soul—and his father, a cold spring hidden in the recesses of a mountain. They did not resemble one another at all.

The Mikado's distinct lack of personal feelings toward Chagum had even made itself apparent in this current visit to Sangal. The only counselor sent with him had been Shuga. Aside from him, only common guards and lower retainers had accompanied Chagum on this journey.

Of course, this wasn't really a diplomatic mission. Or it was, but not the sort of diplomatic mission that required any negotiation or contracts. Chagum was going to attend the coronation ceremony of the new King of Sangal...without the aid of so much as a single civil official familiar with the customs of foreign lands. When Shuga remembered the Mikado giving those orders, a chill went down his spine.

They probably would not arrive at the capital city of Sangal proper until sunset. As soon as they arrived, Chagum's test would begin. He could not fail to properly represent New Yogo.

Sangal was to the southwest of New Yogo. It was a large nation that included an expanse of open country and a vast archipelago of islands. As Chagum had said, it was a country that specialized in trade and marine products.

Their two countries had never been at war. The ancestors of the people of New Yogo had fled the southern countries because of their hatred of war; the Mikado had always consistently promoted peace. But if the various countries to the south ever did dispatch troops to the north, the Sangal nation was in a good position to give New Yogo advance warning of the threat. Better than attempting to weaken their position in war through crippling trade or isolating Sangal, it served everyone’s best interests to work together in a mutually beneficial alliance. New Yogo and Sangal had been trade partners long before the alliance had been proposed, and such an alliance seemed like the next logical step for relations between their two nations.

At the start of the new year, invitations to the coronation celebration of the new King of Sangal had gone out to its allied nations. In Sangal, whenever the King's first son celebrated the birth of a second son, the crown passed from the current King to the King's first son. At the end of the previous year, twin sons had been born to Sangal's Crown Prince Karnan. The transfer of power from father to son would take place shortly after the start of the new year.

At the current Mikado's enthronement ceremony, the King of Sangal had come personally to New Yogo to deliver a gift befitting the Mikado's status: a treasure chest inlaid with pearl and coral and filled with riches. He had also given the celebratory address at the ceremony.

Now that it was time for a new King of Sangal to be crowned, it was reasonable to expect that the people of Sangal would want their courtesy to be returned in kind. But in New Yogo, the Mikado was considered the soul of the country; he could not possibly travel beyond its borders. That's why Chagum had been selected to attend the coronation in the Mikado's place.

When this news was first announced, Chagum was secretly pleased. He would be able to leave the oppressive atmosphere of the palace to visit a foreign nation freely—even if only for once in his life. Even if he had to take part in some complex or bothersome rituals, he didn't really care. He was sure he'd get time to relax and sight-see as well.

"If a new king decided to get coronated among our allies every six months or so, I wouldn't mind," he said lightly.

Shuga immediately reproved him. "Your Majesty. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that the Sangal royal family is deserving of your highest respect. At their core, their people are merchants; the country thrives on sea trade. The King of Sangal personally honored the Mikado with his attendance at his own enthronement ceremony and is acquainted with the measure of your father's character. Sangal is an important ally. If terms ever did break down between our two countries, it would be equally vital for us to retain dominance in diplomatic relations.

"I have said that the Sangal people are merchants at heart. This is true, but there is another side to them as well—especially the royal family. At the fringes of their domain, pirates govern their own contested territory with strength and violence. The blood of such fierce warriors also flows through Sangal's rulers. Your Majesty, you will be carrying the honor and integrity of this nation when you attend this coronation ceremony. Never forget it."

Chagum snorted through his nose. "...I just wanted to experience what life was like in another place. That's all I said."

Shuga glared at him reprovingly for his casual way of speaking. "As you say," he replied in a pinched tone.

"All right, all right...it's so hard, but I'll talk the way you want me to. I understand that the royal family of New Yogo is supposed to be of divine lineage. Consequently, we must never sully ourselves with outside influences, or smell the smell of blood, and must live a life of tranquil harmony. Like a sword in a jeweled scabbard, capable of cutting, but intimidating all opponents to awe so that the sword need never be drawn."

Shuga smiled at Chagum, then pulled his face into a deliberate frown.

After this conversation, the next month passed with blinding speed. It took two weeks to plan for their departure. The journey itself took another twenty-two days. That journey would finally end in just a few hours.

"Shuga! Look! The ships are gathering!"

Dozens of huge vessels left white trails of froth in their wake as they sailed in the direction of Sangal Yasheera, the Moon Palace. Flags of many colors flapped in the wind. Streamers of colored paper scattered into the sea below the ships.

"That is likely the main fleet of the King of Sangal, along with with ships of his closest allies," Shuga said.

A great wave broke upwards from the surface of the ocean. The harsh cries of seagulls flying above the ships echoed toward shore.

Chagum suddenly caught a strong whiff of the salt-smelling sea. His eyes watered; the odor attacked his senses as vigorously as a slap to the face. At that moment, more than the overwhelming power of the sea, he felt a deep sense of his own foreignness in this place.

The ocean spread out before his eyes. Beyond this ocean that the Sangal people named the Yaltash were the southern countries. Two hundred and fifty years ago, Chagum's ancestor the emperor Torugal had fled the fires of war and lands washed in blood to travel across the sea, bringing with him the memories of a powerful culture, military might, and the combined strength of various nations.

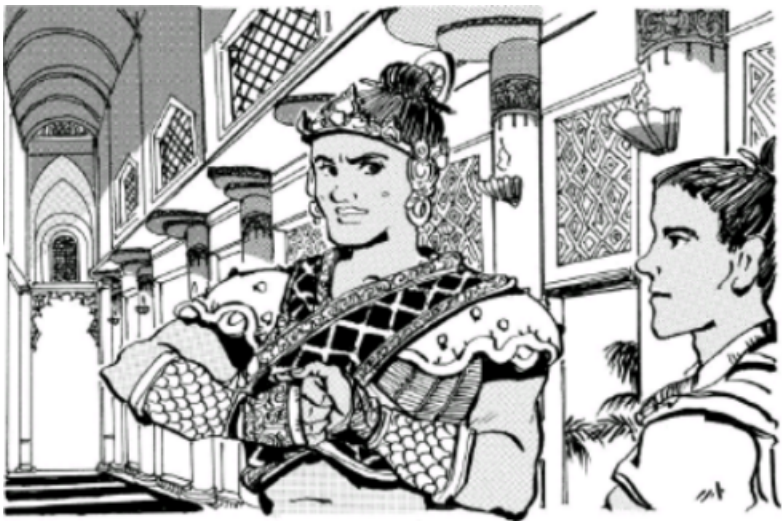
Chagum thought that he would have liked to grow up in a southern country, instead of the cold northern nation where he'd been born. As he gazed out at the same ocean Emperor Torugal had sailed across so long ago, a strange feeling overcame him.

"Your Majesty?" Shuga asked. "Let's go."

Chagum nodded. The deep blue of the sea hurt his eyes, and he slowly turned his back on it.

Chapter 2 - The Martial Arts Demonstration Ceremony

"Oi! I told you I wanted *old* leather hand wraps. Wraps made of new leather will make our hands bleed! We can't possibly use these at the Martial Arts Demonstration Ceremony!" Prince Tarsan shouted as he threw the leather straps at his servants. The straps contacted the servants' shoulders with a cutting sound like that of a whip. The servants quickly vanished into the weapons supply room to find new—or old?—straps.



Prince Tarsan was much taller and stronger than his fourteen years would suggest. He had a reputation at the court as something of a hothead.

A girl working on embroidering a chest guard with gold thread said, "Tarsan, take a breath. You're snapping at everyone like a starving shark. Do you intend to bring that attitude with you to the ceremony?" She giggled at him.

Tarsan glanced at her. Though she too was tall, he towered over his older sister Saluna. "I'm not about to present myself as a foreign fool or a coward. Better a starving shark than that."

Saluna gave him a tight smile. "Well, there's nothing for it. No matter what happens, our older brother could still trounce you."

"Then what's the point in talking about my attitude?"

Yesterday evening, Crown Prince Chagum of New Yogo had arrived at the royal palace as a guest of state. After exchanging formal greetings with the royal family, he'd been led through the palace's annex, and that's when Crown Prince Karnan had said it: the words that had cut Prince Tarsan to his very core.

Karnan had looked over at Tarsan and said with a sigh, "Impeccable conduct. Clever answers to questions. Is he really the same age as you? I can't believe it. He's so dignified, like a high-quality pearl concealed inside an oyster shell. He has an inner quality somewhat like that of the most powerful pirate families of our nation, but no pirate has ever achieved such a high level of personal dignity."

His gazed had flicked over Tarsan, up and down. "You come off as a blunt harpoon in comparison. It is good to be manly and forthright, but members of our family must possess the same qualities as that prince. During my coronation, I beg you not to offend our foreign guests with your vulgarity."

As he remembered his brother's words, Tarsan snorted through his nose.

"Sorry I'm so rude...but I can't help it. I was raised on Kalsh, not the capital. Karnan's spent time on Kalsh, too. I really wish we could have been raised together, in the home city of Sangal's royal family. I know we'd understand one another better then. And it's not like you learn dignity just by having people respect you. I'm stronger than every Yaltash Shuri in Sangal. I know I haven't done much with trade markets, but I've always been praised for my valor and strength in protecting our people from invaders and pirates. Much more than an elegant pearl, I want to be seen as a spear sharp and powerful enough to split the heavens."

He said this all in one breath, eyes fixed on his sister. "Is that wrong?"

Saluna stepped closer to her brother and tapped his fists with her own. "I happen to like blunt harpoons. You don't need to become any kind of pearl if you don't want to. Our brother's the one that's going to be king, so he was raised in the palace. You'll be the one to lead our armies, which is why you were raised on Kalsh island. You are the ideal embodiment of a strong, sea-tempered warrior of the Sangal royal family." She paused. "But I also think I know what our brother was talking about.

"I think Karnan meant to say that you're too direct. Members of the royal family need power, yes, but they also need something else. A hidden strength, like the beam supporting a roof to keep it from collapsing. It's a kind of strength that distinguishes us from the common people.

"During the audience with Crown Prince Chagum, I felt the same way our brother did. In New Yogo, it's said that if a member of their royal family so much as looks at a common person directly, that person will be struck by lightning. But...there is something other than raw power in that prince's eyes. Something concealed deeply, so deep I couldn't see to the bottom of it. Whatever it is, though, it's an incredible strength. Didn't you see it?"

Tarsan stared at his sister with his eyebrows furrowed together.

"You're the sort of person that conceals nothing about themselves," Saluna said. "You know I place great confidence in you just as you are, and that your people love you. Let that be enough for now. You really have nothing to worry about."

Tarsan's shoulders sagged. "I don't really get what you're saying. I should be like the supporting beam of a roof? I don't understand it, and I'd rather not be afraid of something I seem to be lacking. I'd rather be myself—and be feared."

Saluna smiled. She loved her shockingly direct little brother. He was overly violent and still young, but not stupid. She knew the day would come when he would understand what she'd said.

The servants came scrambling back and presented a new set of fist wraps to Prince Tarsan. They moved to wrap the straps around his hands, but Saluna stopped them, took the wraps and unfurled them before wrapping her brother's hands carefully.

"Everyone will be terrified of you when the see these fists."

As he looked up at his smiling sister, his feelings of burning rage gradually lessened. His sister was clever, with golden skin and large brown eyes. Her features were a bit severe, but this had the effect of always making her emotions clear on her face. Many desired her as a wife, but men that desired to marry into the royal family of Sangal had to be thoroughly prepared for the experience. If the men of the royal family had enough strength in their arms to crush a kingdom, the women possessed a perceptive insight that could cut right to the heart of any plot. Their powers of perception were formidable.

From the founding of the kingdom, the women of the islands of the Yaltash ocean had been considered the country's most vital—and irreplaceable—treasure.

The Kings of Sangal had governed these islands for a few hundred years. The kingdom had not always been as large as it was currently. In the beginning, pockets of islands would band together here and there, forming temporary alliances to fend off pirate raiders. When the men of the islands had reached marriageable age, they had joined their local militias to protect their homes—unless the fishing season had been poor, in which case they'd often turned pirate for a season themselves, attacking islands that they were not allies with in order to acquire food and resources.

When they'd lacked enough hands to continue this progression, the Sangal people had sent slave hunters—Rash Tashi—to other nations. That's how Sangal's early kingdom was formed. Although slavery had been abolished in Sangal by modern laws, the custom of buying and selling slaves by Sangal tradesmen continued as a practice in other countries.

As for the pirates: while fending off attacks from other raiders and from the people of the islands, their armies had also grown strong enough for them to settle and found a nation of their own. But to consider it a country in the same way as Sangal or New Yogo, which both followed the guidance of one centralized leader, would be a mistake. The people of the pirate nation served whoever the most beneficial candidate was for their interests, whether those interests were trade or war. Often, these were ruthless men; no single leader gained dominance over the others for very long.

The ancestors of the Sangal royal family had been pirates. But a succession of outrageously strong men and astonishingly perceptive women had managed to distinguish themselves from ordinary pirates by soundly beating back all opposition and by forging alliances whose bonds were strong enough to last even after the original leaders that had negotiated them had died. Little by little, Sangal had built up its vast empire by the aptness of its leaders and the strength of its alliances.

Even some two hundred years after its founding, the essential character of the Sangal people had not changed. Oh, the size of Sangal's dominion had increased, and its language was much altered; there were citizens in the kingdom that could not speak a word of Sangal's standard dialect. The larger Sangal kingdom had swallowed up twelve smaller nations in its conquests; the Kings of those regions had become regional governors, but were still known by their traditional title of Island Guardians. The Island Guardians maintained their strong ties with the Yaltash Shuri, the brothers of the sea—men who, in the past, had been conscripted to defend their homes once they'd reached marriageable age, and who even now comprised the bulk of the King of Sangal's army. Every Island Guardian was permitted to collect taxes within their domain and to hire mercenaries and armies as they saw fit.

The King of Sangal could in turn levy taxes on the Island Guardians and conscript troops from any—or all—of the islands. The King's heir was always raised in the capital and trained as a soldier in the King's army. Generals were selected from the very best soldiers of the army to

lead troops in battle; the King's second son was always made the leader of these and called the High General. All Island Guardians had to obey the High General's orders as well as the King's.

As the Sangal kingdom became larger, the Island Guardians came to fear invasion by outsiders and attacks by pirate raids less and less, which gave them leeway to expand Sangal's already extensive trade network into foreign markets. And so the Island Guardians became wealthy and resourceful sea merchants. Thanks to the taxes they were able to collect that were collected by the King of Sangal in turn, the rulers of Sangal became fabulously wealthy.

Of course, there were always people that chafed under the King's rule: those that threw away their ties to their homeland to settle on islands that were not ruled by Sangal. Some of these would become Rassharou, the nomadic sea-drifters. People that owed no allegiance to the King of Sangal paid no taxes. Such people were not particularly uncommon; if a man had three sons, one might serve the King, another might serve an Island Guardian, and the third might serve neither.

Because of the scale of the kingdom, the King of Sangal was no longer directly responsible for the care and well-being of his subjects; neither was he the sole arbiter of judgement for crimes. The King chose representatives that he perceived to be the best-suited to the tasks of governance; these loose human connections formed the basis of the unified Sangal.

In order to strengthen these bonds, it was common practice for female members of the royal family to wed Island Guardians. This served a few purposes: first, it allowed these women of rank to observe and potentially quash any flames of rebellion in Island Guardians before they got started; and second, it provided a way to elevate the position and status of the Island Guardians themselves—even Island Guardians whose territory was small or of little note.

The Island Guardians had some cause to fear their wives, and not just because of their rank. The electors of every Island Guardian were the women of the Sangal royal family. In a case where a current Island

Guardian was not considered to be a suitable match, the bride-to-be would call a conference of all of the women of her rank and the women would unanimously choose a new Island Guardian for her to marry. The right to call such a conference did not end after the woman was married. If she grew to dislike her current husband strongly enough, she had the right to call the conference, which would dissolve the current marriage and sanctify another.

Every time a new Island Guardian was due to take over the governance of their territory, this all-female conference was automatically called to the royal court. It was the responsibility of these women, all members of the royal family and with unquestioned loyalty and unrivalled wisdom, to select the new Island Guardian.

In many ways, these women manipulated the levers of power that governed the Sangal kingdom. From birth, each of them received a thorough and exhaustive education. Princesses and queens were included in this group of course, as well as the daughters, wives, and female cousins of Island Guardians. From the age of four, they gathered to live collectively at the royal palace, permitted to visit their home islands for only a third of each year. After passing the age of twelve, they began a long expedition to all of Sangal's islands, so as to best learn about the living conditions on each of them.

Granted both thorough knowledge and long years of traveling experience, the abilities of these women could not be compared with those of any other women in the world.

The current King of Sangal had two sons and three daughters. In order of age, they were Crown Prince Karnan, Princess Karina, Princess Roksana (who was already wed), Princess Saluna, and the youngest, Prince Tarsan.

Prince Tarsan wrapped a belt around his hips as he spoke. "Saluna...I think I got mad at what our brother said because I don't want to be like that prince. At all. Haven't we been taught since were were born that we have to walk on our own two feet? I want to be a shield strong enough to protect our home. I don't think of myself as anything

else. I've trained this hard for this long to be strong enough to be that shield. With me protecting our nation, I'm sure any number of hidden pearls will be able to form in peace, thanks to me.

"Tell me, is that Prince Chagum even capable of protecting his homeland? His position protects him from anything that might damage his fragile dignity. Aside from when we exchanged greetings, his face was wrapped up behind that white cloth. Because in his own country, apparently, that's the only way common people would be able to look at him. That little..."

Chagum's pale face swam up in his mind's eye. Tarsan suddenly remembered his rage. "And he came most of the way here in an oxcart. An oxcart! What was he thinking? If he'd chosen horses he would've gotten here faster. Is it really all that beneficial for us to be allies with his country?"

He spat the words loudly and venomously, but then he was distracted. The soldiers set to participate in the Martial Arts Demonstration Ceremony finished donning their garb and prepared to match themselves against Sangal’s second prince.

Tarsan gave them a moment to prepare, then followed them into the exhibition hall. They grinned as they bowed to him. Every man was well-built, obviously strong, and deeply suntanned. They had been selected from the King's army as the best fist fighters the country had to offer.

They belonged to various divisions in the army, but among those that specialized in hand fighting, there wasn't a man in the army that was not at least passingly familiar with Tarsan. He knew most of these men well. He was the youngest of the group, but his physique, physical strength and honed skill would not put him at a disadvantage against any adult opponent. The soldiers that served as his personal guards as well as those that served in other sections of the army recognized him as a warrior worthy of respect.

Within the group of assembled men were many war veterans. When they caught sight of Tarsan in his ceremonial uniform, one said

earnestly, "Your Majesty...truly, it suits you. You look just like High General Yunan." The others fell suddenly silent. The King's brother Yunan had been High General of Sangal, a man of renowned bravery that the entire army had believed in and respected. He had died of an unexpected illness less than two years past, and he'd had no son. The soldiers of the army knew that Yunan had treated Tarsan very much as his own son. Tarsan had been told many times that he resembled his uncle in his younger days.

Tarsan was happy at the compliment, but his eyebrows drew together. "Thank you. I hope to demonstrate through my performance that the resemblance is not in appearance only."

"I am sure your guests will be amazed. We're the ones that know the strength of your arm best, after all," one of the members of Tarsan's personal guard said. He laughed a little. "Every time we spar, you leave me with bruises where the chest guard doesn't reach, Your Majesty."

Tarsan looked closely at him and saw that there were indeed mottled bruises along a thin strip of the man's abdomen that the chest guard had not protected. Tarsan let out a breath.

"Those are my fault," he said. "From now on, I'll only aim for the places that the chest guard protects." He clapped the young guard on the shoulder. "Come, men. Let's show our foreign visitors the might of Sangal!"

The men cheered. Tarsan began walking. The others fell into step behind him. As he walked, he slammed the knuckles of his wrapped fists together in anticipation. *I wonder if I'll ever get to hit that damn prince.*

If Tarsan ever did manage to land a solid blow to Crown Prince Chagum's face, what would happen? He'd probably get a bloody nose. Good luck maintaining his dignity then. Tarsan's lips twitched upward in a faint smile.

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Chagum felt sweat moving in a line down his spine as he sat in the royal courtyard in a chair reserved for guests of state. This country was much warmer than he'd anticipated—he'd never sweated outside in the middle of winter before. The semitransparent cloth covering he wore completely covered his forehead and eyes; it collected his sweat, and as a result he saw everything through what seemed like a film of water. As time went on, he became vaguely dizzy.

This is certainly different from the Mikado's palace.

Chagum sighed as he thought about the heavy seclusion and silence of his home. The Sangal kingdom seemed like an unusually open and uninhibited kind of place. All the doors and windows of the palace gaped large, always open; the palace seemed to have been built to allow the wind to pass through it at every point. The shining white walls set against the backdrop of the deep blue sky and ocean waves were contrastive; looking at it all almost hurt his eyes. And the flowers! They twisted around the pillars to the gates leading into the courtyard, fire-red, growing in large clusters of blossoms. Their sweet fragrance permeated the entire courtyard.

In the very center of the courtyard was a pond, though that did not seem to be quite the right word for it. It was almost large enough to be called a lake. The mirror sheen of its surface reflected the sky perfectly. There were twelve small flat-bottomed boats lining the sides of the pond.

"Excuse me, Prince Chagum," a woman said in a clear voice.

Chagum looked up at her. The woman addressing him stood behind the empty seat to his left. Chagum had wondered who might come to sit in it. The woman was tall, and not alone; three other women were with her, clearly her attendants.

With a graceful movement, the woman bowed and bent to one knee. Her skin and eyes caught the rays of the setting sun as she moved. The gleam in her eyes was as vivid as if it were alive. Her long brown hair was styled in an imitation of flowers and vines. Her clothing was

loose and thin, embroidered all over with tiny seed pearls. Her shoulders were entirely bare.

"My name is Saluna," she said. "I am most grateful that you have traveled here from New Yogo to witness my brother's coronation ceremony. For the duration of your stay, it has been decided that this foolish one shall attend on you as a servant."

Chagum suddenly stood up from his seat and removed the cloth from his face. "Princess Saluna, of the royal family of Sangal. I thank you for your generous welcome. Being received by a princess of this land does me great honor. Please rise, and and take a seat." He gestured to the empty seat next to him.

Saluna smiled a little and took the seat indicated. Suddenly, the delicate fragrance of flowers—different from those in the courtyard—wafted toward Chagum's face. He had rarely ever talked to a young woman so close to his own age before, and the thought of doing so now made him nervous. He tried not to let his feelings show on his face.

Many guests of state had been invited to the coronation ceremony. Seats had been arranged to completely surround the pond; in those seats, Chagum saw the other foreign dignitaries and their attendants. He also noticed many wives of Island Guardians and other women of royal rank mixed in among the guests. Looking closer, he realized that the King must have arranged things so that each guest would be greeted by a woman of about their own age.

"Your Yogoese is very fluent," Chagum said. "You surprised me."

"Thank you. We learn the languages of the countries we are friends with from an early age."

Chagum smiled faintly, then said in fluent Sangalese: "So do we. I have been learning Sangalese since childhood. While learning it, I often thought of the Sangal people, living in their beautiful country to the south."

Saluna's eyebrows went up. "Well...I didn't know that. I thought that the royal family of New Yogo spoke nothing but Yogoese."

"The Mikado speaks nothing but Yogoese, because he is the soul of the nation. But while he was a prince, he also learned many languages. Words are the soul's voice. Without knowing a country's words, it's impossible to know its soul. Sangalese is a very musical language."

Saluna smiled broadly at him. "Yes, I feel the same. Sangalese lends itself well to a grand chorus of raised voices before battle—or to solo ballads echoing across the waves." Saluna looked at the surface of the pond and pointed. "We call that water Ruhn Yaltash, the Surrounded Sea. The sea is considered the mother of all the people of Sangal."

After saying this, Saluna remembered something that made her giggle. "When my brother Tarsan was little, he jumped in. Said he was going to play with the fish."

Her whole demeanor changed as she related the exploits of her mischievous younger brother. Chagum's heart warmed to her. He was jealous that there was a royal family that could so openly discuss its foibles with outsiders. The world he'd come from had been based entirely on his blood ties to the Mikado—and all the stifling expectations of perfection that came with them. The only thing his kinship with the Mikado had ever really gotten him was threats and attempts on his life.

"I never considered that a prince could play like that," Chagum said. "But I can imagine it. It seems that the Sangal people are full of lively energy. Even this Martial Arts Demonstration Ceremony will be a fight held over water, to honor Sangal's long history of bravely battling the waves."

At that moment, he heard the strange sound of a flute playing up and down the notes of an octave. "Please turn your attention to the Gate of the Sea," an announcer called out. "Sangal's heroes shall enter from there."

Two rows of men marching in file entered from the Gate of the Sea, their dark skin burnished gold in the light of the setting sun. All of them had their fists wrapped in leather and wore elaborately decorated chest

guards as well as loincloths held up by ceremonial belts. Aside from this, they wore no other clothing.

Chagum looked at their leader, a proud boy with his head held high, and was a little surprised. He recognized him as one of the princes that had greeted him the previous night.

"Isn't that Prince Tarsan at the front of the line?" he asked.

"Yes. Prince Tarsan is Sangal's most skilled hand fighter."

Jealousy welled up in Chagum's chest again. He envied the freedom of a prince being allowed to personally and bodily participate in a martial arts tournament honoring his brother.

The flute played a shrill note. The announcer said, "King Tafmur and Prince Karnan will enter now."

Saluna whispered something and stood up. Chagum stood as well.

From the palace's northern side at the Gate of the Sky, the King of Sangal and Prince Karnan entered together. Karnan led his oldest son by the hand. The newly born prince was carried by his mother, the queen-to-be, at the rear of the procession.

All the foreign guests of state broke out into simultaneous applause.

"Friends, allies, esteemed guests. Welcome to the coronation ceremony of the new King of Sangal. Please share our nation's joy with us for the duration of the festivities." The King of Sangal's voice boomed so loud that it carried to the furthest corners of the courtyard and echoed off the walls.

The sound of the applause became even louder. "And now, for the first of our ceremonies, the Martial Arts Demonstration. All of our country's finest fighters will be participating in the event. It is a somewhat violent way to celebrate, but we of Sangal take great pride in being brave sailors that fight on rough seas. Please, enjoy yourselves."

The twelve men set to participate in the ceremony briefly greeted the guests, then spread out, six to each side of the pond in the center of the courtyard. They stood so that they faced one another.

The sound of the flute faded away and was replaced with the steady beating of a drum.

At the sound, the twelve fighters leaped through the air in perfect arcs, each one landing directly onto one of the flat-bottomed boats in the water. The boats sank briefly under their weight before resurfacing. Not a single fighter stumbled or lost their balance.

Ta-tum. The rhythm of the drum beats quickened. The fighters leaped through the air once more, each one criss-crossing with another fighter in midair. They beat their chests with their fists as they flitted past one another.

Each fighter alighted on a different boat than they'd been on before. Some stumbled this time, but none of them fell.

The rhythm of the drum increased again. This time the men attempted to land blows on their opponents as they crossed them in midair—all while trying to land safely on a boat.

The audience was utterly captivated by such a display of human agility and acrobatics. Chagum devoured the spectacle with his eyes.

While watching the fighters land their blows on one another, Chagum suddenly heard the voice of someone he had long missed.

Don't lose yourself in the moment. Observe everything. When there is a stone in the water, the water reacts and moves around it. As long as you observe everything, you will be able to react and see the direction the attack comes from.

Balsa.

Chagum struggled with all his might to prevent his emotions from showing on his face. An image of the woman that had worked so hard to

protect him surfaced from his memories.

Balsa had taught Chagum a Kanbalese breathing technique called chiki. It was a technique that could be used for both attack and defense. He had only begun to master the technique with Balsa, but he had honed what he knew of it over these past years. He hadn't kept in the habit of using the technique for its combat benefits; he'd kept it up because it helped him hold on to his memories of Balsa.

Chagum used the technique. A short time later, he felt the benefits of it permeating his body. He'd always hoped to show Balsa his mastery of the technique one day—but that was an impossible dream.

Many of the fighters on the water began to show their fatigue and started swaying steadily from side to side. Prince Tarsan remained steady on his feet.

There was a terrific splash, then another, then another in rapid succession. Three men fell from their boats into the ceremonial pond. Some spectators gasped. A short time later the three fallen fighters surfaced, wiping water out of their eyes and wearing expressions of embarrassment. Some snorted water from their noses.

As soon as the first group of fighters fell, their unsteadiness seemed to spread to the others, like the cumulative effect of snowflakes causing an avalanche. As the fighters leaped from their boats once again, they fell into the pond like rain. At the end of this leap, only three men managed to land safely on a boat. One of these was Prince Tarsan.

The rhythm of the drum sped up once more. Without turning around, the three men leaped backwards off their boats back onto the shore. When Prince Tarsan landed near him, Chagum's body involuntarily twitched.

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Tarsan felt like he was on fire. The beats of the drum pounded through his blood. His body throbbed with remembered echoes of the blows he'd taken from his comrades in the ceremony. He was wound so tight he could hardly stand it. Power and heat flowed through him. *Look at me, brother! Not a hidden pearl, but a spear piercing the heavens! You should rejoice to have such a brother!*

He could feel the aftershocks of blows in his shoulders and throughout his body. He had been quick and precise in his counterattacks and had rejoiced every time another man had fallen into the pond.

It would be good for my brother to see that darling little pearl's fragility with his own eyes.

The sound of the drum faded, signaling the end of the ceremony. Tarsan leaped backward off the boat he stood upon. All throughout the ceremony, Tarsan had nursed a secret desire to test Crown Prince Chagum in some way. He managed to land in front of Chagum and pretended to stumble as he landed. As he fell, he aimed a backward swing of his fist at Chagum.

The blow connected to Chagum's cheek...or so he thought, but at that same moment he felt the force of his own blow recoil back up his arm. The next moment, he was thrown forward as if he'd been struck. Someone seized him strongly from behind.

He turned to face the person holding him and stared directly into the startled eyes of Crown Prince Chagum with a feeling of cold rage.

"What is this outrage, Tarsan!" Saluna stood up and faced her brother head-on. At this unexpected accident, the courtyard fell silent as death.

The King of Sangal and Crown Prince Karnan stood swiftly. "What happened? Are you hurt, Crown Prince Chagum?"

From behind Chagum's seat, guards and his own personal protectors scrambled forward to protect him from a danger that was already past. The faces of the guards were pale and pinched with shame.

When Chagum realized he was entirely uninjured, he breathed a sigh of relief. Thanks to the chiki breathing technique, Tarsan's blow had been reflected squarely back at himself. Chagum scrambled to prevent Tarsan from falling, then met the prince's eyes as he turned to face him.

Suddenly Tarsan's body felt extremely heavy. At first, Chagum saw only his own surprise reflected in Tarsan's eyes, but that quickly changed to anger. Tarsan blushed red to the tips of his ears. He finally realized the significance of what he had done. He had raised a hand as an opponent to a representative of an allied nation. He had meant to pass it all off as an accident, but even an accident occurring during a ceremony of this magnitude and importance would be considered a grave error—especially because it had befallen such an honored and esteemed guest. The consequences would have been even worse if Chagum had been injured.

Tarsan knew that his own immature hubris and unbridled rage had gotten the better of him. Trembling, he fell to his knees in front of Chagum. He felt the eyes of his father and brother gazing down at him. When he glanced sidelong at their expressions, his stomach contracted.

At that moment, he heard a voice from above.

"Are you all right? You must have come down so hard as you fell," Crown Prince Chagum said. "Stumbling a bit while landing from a jump like that is understandable." Chagum stared steadily into Tarsan's eyes, but spoke for the whole room to hear. "Please, do not worry about me. I am unhurt. Although Prince Tarsan briefly lost his balance, he landed in such a way as to spare me injury. This demonstrates great consideration on his part." Little resembling the startled boy that had displayed such shock at Tarsan's blow, Chagum offered the clearly agitated King of Sangal a calm and measured smile.

"It was a truly splendid ceremony. It has been my great honor to witness it. If our positions were ever reversed, I hope I would be capable of showing Prince Tarsan the same gracious consideration that he has shown me in shielding me from danger." Chagum's tone

contained a hint of laughter. The guests of state immediately relaxed their silent vigilance. Here and there, people smiled; small pockets of applause broke out.

Both Crown Prince Karnan and the King of Sangal visibly relaxed, impressed with Chagum's tact in managing the situation. They returned to their seats.

Prince Tarsan's entire body trembled with shame. Chagum's masterful manipulation of the circumstances had Tarsan coming off as a clumsy fool. He struggled to contain the roiling in his stomach.

This cold prince that he hated had concealed all of this emotions behind his eyes, as if he'd dropped a curtain over them. Tarsan understood clearly that Chagum did not hate him. He struggled hard to contain his own hatred, writhing inside him like an animal. He didn't want to think about the implications of someone he hated not hating him in return.

The musicians resumed playing in the courtyard. The men that had participated in the ceremony began reforming into lines near the pond.

"Please forgive my terrible transgression," Prince Tarsan said, still on his knees. He stood and bowed, then turned back toward the pond.

As he turned away, Chagum called out to him. "I..." Tarsan turned back to Chagum and met his eyes. "I don't want such a trivial matter to be a thorn between us," Chagum said.

Tarsan scrunched his eyebrows, but did not break eye contact with Chagum. When he saw his hatred reflected back at him from Chagum's mirror-surface eyes, he was astonished at the force of it. He had said many self-important things today, even shameful things, and now he seemed to hear all of them again as if for the first time. The hatred behind those utterances felt childish and petty. For the first time, he saw past Prince Chagum's aloof facade and perceived a boy of about his own age underneath.

He stared at Chagum for a short while longer, then replied, "Neither do I." He bowed again and turned away.

He stopped short of joining his comrades to ask, "Prince Chagum, are you acquainted with any forms of martial arts?"
Chagum's eyes gleamed brightly at the question. Prince Tarsan's perception of him instantly changed. "That's something we should talk about, I think...if we get a chance to, during the celebration."

Tarsan bowed crisply—and sincerely—once more, then moved to line up with his comrades.

Chapter 3 -

Wind in the Flower Pavilion

The evening rays of the sun lit the Flower Pavilion in a golden glow. The Flower Pavilion was at the western edge of the royal palace near the tip of the cape that jutted into the ocean. It was a place of repose for the women of the palace.

The women permitted in the Flower Pavilion were of the highest rank: princesses and queens, island guardians' wives and their daughters. The pavilion's structure was a dome supported by six large pillars. There were no walls. The roof was curved.

The women were afforded clear view of the cliffs and the waves of the sea crashing to shore from the edges of the pavilion. To the east and north, flowers bloomed in profusion, so thick and lush that in some places they were overgrown enough to conceal people behind and under them. This was not just a place of repose, but a place for women that wanted to hide—or to conduct discussions in private.

The floor of the pavilion was paved in smooth white stone. In the very center, a decorative fountain gushed forth. Water from the fountain

flowed down into irrigation grooves that watered the garden; the water eventually flowed over the edge of the cliff into the sea.

The evening wind carried a tang of salt commingled with the fragrances of the ranguna flower and the floral perfumes of the women in the pavilion. Right now, aside from Prince Karnan's wife Zina, every woman of prominence was present. Zina's health was still delicate from the recent birth; when she wasn't conducting her mandatory ceremonial duties, she spent most of her time resting and recovering.

The King's second daughter Roksana reclined while sipping a liqueur laced with flower petals. "Ah, how refreshing. Rokkari must have put ice in it this time. I can't get anything so fine outside the capital. On Nourmu, we want for nothing except ice."

Ice needed to be imported to Sangal from the north and stored specially in natural caves to preserve it at a low temperature. With the exception of the capital, no other islands or territories in Sangal maintained such caves, so ice was a great luxury.

As the women lounged and stretched in the pavilion, the topic of conversation turned to the welcoming reception of the foreign dignitaries during the Martial Arts Demonstration ceremony.

"Saluna, you're so lucky!" Roksana said with a wink. "Crown Prince Chagum is pale, but very handsome."

Saluna gave her a slightly uncomfortable smile. "I suppose so...his eyes are striking." The women surrounding her tittered. "The men of

Sangal are tough and strong, but their eyes hold no secrets."

"I liked the man sitting next to him," Roksana said. "He was taller than the prince by a full head at least."

"Ah, that's the prince's counselor," Saluna said. "In New Yogo, he is considered a very gifted Star Reader. Star Readers divine the shadow of the future of their nation. They also have the opportunity to become New Yogo's Holy Sage. Certainly, there are no disadvantages in cultivating such an acquaintance."

Cousins and aunts mingled and spoke to one another lightly in this way, but the King's oldest daughter, Karina, appeared troubled. Seeing this, Saluna took a seat next to her and asked, "What troubles you, sister?"

Karina smiled fondly at her, but her expression soon set itself into grim lines. She lifted her head and said in a voice that carried, "I have a concern to bring before you all."

Everyone ceased their conversations and looked at Karina. She was just thirty-four years old, but was possessed of a calm and quiet steadiness that caused many of the other women to view her as sailors would the captain of their fleet.

"Have any of your husbands been behaving strangely lately?"

The women looked at Karina with nervous smiles and shook their heads.

"Well," Karina said, "perhaps you can correct me if I'm mistaken. But I have cause to suspect treason."

Roksana plied her fingers over the edge of her glass and tilted her head toward Karina. "What cause? Do you have evidence? What kind of unusual behavior should we be wary of?"

"Let's see," Karina said. "Training extra-hard for a military competition, maybe? Or receiving an unusual number of messages via carrier pigeon, or attempting to open trade routes to the south...or holding private consultations without you present?"

Nearly half of the women's faces clouded over. "Hit the nail on the head, have I?" Karina asked sharply.

One of the middle-aged women shrugged. "Are any of those indicators really evidence of guilt? Traders come up from the south all the time, and people often communicate by carrier pigeon. Last year, I also grew suspicious at a sudden increase in the number of messages my husband was sending and receiving, so I bribed the bird keeper to pass me any messages going in and out. But when I did so, I discovered nothing suspicious."

"It is possible that the increased amount of messages was a smoke screen, my dear aunt," Karina said. "It may be that the messages were meant to draw your vigilance and that their contents were meant to put you at ease." Whispers broke out among the women as Karina spoke.

"My husband's communications have also increased in the past year, and I too have maintained constant vigilance," Karina said. "He has also increased his hours spent in physical training, though the messages he received had nothing to do with that. The messages were not suspicious in and of themselves, either. They concerned matters of shipping and cargo, and a certain something discovered by one of his longshoremen."

Karina produced a lump of tar from her clothing and suddenly split it in half, revealing a sheet of white paper concealed inside. "The discovery was masterfully done. One night, a trade ship arrived in the harbor from the Talsh empire. There was a welcoming banquet for ships that evening. One of my husband's longshoremen noticed a sailor from the Talsh ship leaving the banquet early. He followed him back to the dock. At first, the longshoreman believed that the sailor had only returned to his ship to check its moorings, but then the sailor suddenly dove into the ocean.

"After a short time, the sailor made his way back to shore, appearing entirely unconcerned. He returned to his lodging house shortly after.

"The longshoreman is a conscientious man as well as an observant one. He waited until dawn and dove to the same spot as the sailor.

While underwater, he noticed this pressed tightly into the grooves of the anchor chain.

"Ingenious, isn't it? If he hadn't noticed the sailor leaving the banquet, he would never have thought anything suspicious about a small lump of tar attached to an anchor chain."

The oldest woman present, the deceased queen's mother Torana, rose from her seat and beckoned Karina over. Due to her advanced age, she was little involved with the goings-on of government any longer, but because of the early deaths of many of the women's mothers in childbirth, Torana's opinion was relied upon as if it came from their own mothers.

Karina stood up and took a place beside Torana. The other women pressed in, eagerly trying to read the letter that Karina had in her hands. The paper was full of holes, but nothing at all was written on it.

"The message is encrypted," Torana said. "There must be a trick to reading it."

"Yes, I thought the same thing, honored grandmother. In messages that my husband received from carrier pigeons, I thought there might be a cipher used to disguise my husband's true intentions."

Torana lifted her head from the paper and looked at Karina.

"Were you ever able to confirm if there was a cipher?"

"Yes, but this is not a message that can be read now. In order to discover its contents, it must be read in the light of the morning sun."

Torana frowned and slowly shook her head. "It seems the men have gotten worked up over something. Every man of Sangal that goes off his chain is always bound to be a little dangerous."

"What should we do? Should we tell our husbands what we have discovered and prevent them from doing anything reckless?" Roksana asked while looking at her sister and grandmother.

Torana shook her head. Karina took a guess at what she was thinking: "For now, we should continue to pretend not to know and keep constant watch. We need to find out who the instigator is and

anyone lending them support. We also need to discover the root cause of this plot and destroy it."

Instead of anxiety or nervousness, the expressions of the surrounding women settled into a decisive grimness that would be considered most improper by outsiders. Like the men of Sangal, the women also preferred the challenge of strong winds to the boredom of calm seas.

"We have changed out any number of Island Guardians before, when the need arose," Karina said. "But what's critical here is that we avoid rebellion. It is our duty to prevent Sangal from collapsing from within. We have to find the leader."

One of the women said, "Keeping the hundreds of islands in the Yaltash ocean unified is no simple matter. But I am concerned about the matter of the traders to the south. It seems we may need to block them from access, and that worries me."

Karina's face tightened. "Hm. Well, we have cause to distrust at least one southern merchant, so it stands to reason we should distrust others. The person that concealed the letter in the anchor chain was a merchant from Yogo. Since that man and my husband have started business dealings, they've been in constant communication."

"A merchant from Yogo? Not a merchant from Talsh?" Roksana asked.

Karina nodded. "Yes. He was aboard a Talsh vessel, but his features were Yogoese. He was even wearing a Talsh uniform, but at the time I simply considered it a costume to make doing business with the Talsh simpler. Still, it was a bit odd, which is why I remember."

"My husband has frequent dealings with Yogo," one of the Island Guardians' wives said. "Perhaps it's worth investigation."

Roksana turned her head toward her. "Perhaps. But wasn't the man on the Talsh ship working alone? The man your husband deals with and the spy on the ship aren't necessarily the same. Do you remember his name?"

"Um, something like Togum."

"And is the man we have been speaking of also called Togum?" Roksana asked.

"No," Karina answered. "I've been informed that his name is Rasugu. But names are easily changed, as are appearances. What we need to do is find out who is manipulating these spies so that we can shed light on this plot."

The women surrounding her nodded. The future of the nation depended on them. They had been taught and disciplined to always work together on their shared goals.

"Karina," Torana said. "I am old, and my mind is not what it once was. I will delegate you. Hear every voice and take decisive action. We are most vulnerable now, before the new King is crowned. It is now that any traitorous Island Guardians will make their move. On top of that, your husband will soon arrive with the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita. I have only ever seen one once, and have no desire to repeat such an experience. We are approaching a storm. Everyone, I entreat you, take every possible precaution and leave no stone unturned."

Sunlight streamed over the ocean waves, sparkling and scattering light where it fell. The women looked out upon the waves at sunset, their thoughts clearly weighing heavily on their minds.

Chapter 4 - The Deal

As the women of the royal palace of Sangal watched the sunset from the Flower Pavilion, the Rassharou girl Surina watched that same sunset aboard ship, all alone.

Since the day she'd been separated from her family, her circumstances had changed so drastically that she could scarcely believe it. She felt like she was living through a vivid extended dream.

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Surina passed the night of that first terrible day on the beach of the deserted island, concealing herself in a thicket of shangal ferns. She'd swum a long way and was entirely exhausted. She fell asleep the moment she tumbled into the thicket and had nightmares all night. Her chest constricted with grief; she had no idea what to do next. She remained in the thicket until dawn.

Then she remembered her father, and Rashi, and Racha, and she cried without stopping for a long time.

Her father had ordered her to run away, but without a boat, how was she supposed to do that? And there wasn't even any fresh drinking water on the island. It seemed she had no choice but to try to make it to the nearest inhabited island, Rash—but the ship that had attacked her family had come from that direction.

What she really couldn't figure out was why the King of Sangal's soldiers would be on a merchant vessel and why those soldiers had attacked Rassharou ships without cause. She couldn't figure out how it had happened at all.

As she thought about it all, she heard the unmistakable sound of rowboats coming toward shore. She peeked out of the thicket to look and saw five small boats carrying soldiers gliding across the water. The movement of the oarsmen recalled to her something of how Rassharou oarsmen moved.

She saw soldiers clutching their bows and arrows. They called out to one another while looking at the beach. Surina concealed herself more deeply in the thicket. Were they searching for her? Probably...or maybe they were looking for anyone that may have escaped their attack.

They landed on the beach and started a search. She'd arrived yesterday, so her footprints might still be visible on the beach—unless high tide had come in and washed them away. That might save her. Surina stilled herself and listened to the sound of the rowboats, now just off shore.

Then she realized something.

Kon, ko ko. Koko koko ko kon.

It was the sound of the oars dipping in and out of the sea—but the rhythmic beats were ones that only the Rassharou used. There was a message concealed in that rhythm, one that she could interpret. She had learned these patterns and rhythms from Rassharou oarsmen since she was a child. The code was secret; only the Rassharou ever used it. She listened with her whole body, struggling to interpret the message.

Is anyone alive? If anyone is alive, come to the beach at moonrise.

The message repeated, over and over again, to anyone within hearing range.

Had other Rassharou come to rescue her? She very much wanted to believe that. She clenched her fists and tried to hope.

Waiting for moonrise seemed to take a long time. She spent some of the time walking around the deserted island eating fruit from the trees and slitting open the vines twisting around their trunks to suck water out of them. She returned to the shangal thicket before moonrise and waited for someone to approach.

Finally, she heard the sound of oars on the waves again and stood up.

We've come to save you. Come out.

Surina understood the code of the oars perfectly, but she was still scared to leave the thicket. She mustered her courage, then stepped out of cover onto the moonlit beach.

Long thin rowboats approached the shore. A man, alone, alighted from one of these boats and dragged the vessel up the sand with quick and practiced movements. Then he looked around, turning in a circle. He stopped and stood still when he caught sight of Surina.

"Are you Rassharou?"

He did not speak Sangalese, but the language that the Rassharou used among themselves. Having passed half her life on shore, Surina

was not very used to hearing it spoken by other people that weren't her family. She hesitated, but then said, "Yes, I am Rassharou."

The man's shoulders relaxed. His expression was one of relief. "Come this way. Don't run. We're here to rescue you." He came closer to her. When was close enough that she could almost make out his face in the light of the moon, she realized that the man was rather old. When she and the man could see each other clearly, he stopped moving.

"Oh...a girl, is it?" His tone expressed surprise—and disappointment. When he spoke again, though, his voice was kind. "You must have been through a lot. You've done very well to get this far. To live through something like that, all alone, you must be very strong and brave."

"Do you know what happened to my father?" she asked without thinking, then hastily added, "I'm sorry. I'm Surina. My father is—"

The old man approached the edge of the thicket near where she stood and sat down. He invited her to sit as well. "I don’t know know your father is, but not everyone in the attack yesterday died. Some were captured and still live."

"My father would have been carrying a baby," Surina said. "And he may have had a boy with him, around ten years old."

The old man raised his eyebrows. "Was he wounded? In the shoulder?"

Surina leaned forward. "Yes! Yes, that's him! He had an arrow in his right shoulder. I tried to pull it out, but..."

The man smiled at her. "Is that right? It's probably the man I'm thinking of, then. Since he didn't fight and had children with him, he'll probably be sold at the slave market, along with the children."

Her family was alive. Tears overflowed in Surina's eyes. She tried to ask about the safety of her uncles, too, but no sound escaped her throat.

"You probably don't understand what's happened at all, do you?"

Surina nodded.

"You think you were attacked by a Sangal ship," the old man said. "But it wasn't a Sangal ship. It flew Sangal colors, but it was really a Talsh spy vessel."

Surina's mouth dropped open in shock.

"You were unlucky," the old man said. "Ordinarily, if they'd come across you, they would have just passed you by. But just at the time when your ships were rounding the cape, that ship was on the other side of it, measuring the depth of the ocean floor. They were searching for a safe route for their warships to take to the capital. Around here, there are many places where the depth of the ocean floor changes dramatically. That makes it a dangerous area for warships to sail, because they could easily founder in shallow waters. But if they could find a safe route from this direction, it would be the perfect one to take to launch a surprise attack.

"If they were discovered doing this work, they faced the danger of having their tactics exposed. In order to prevent that, they attacked your friends and family."

"Then my father..."

"No. I doubt he's been killed. If they took your family as prisoners of war, their secret would still be safe. It's not like the Rassharou are loyal to the King of Sangal, and with the Talsh being the Talsh, they could probably use the extra workers."

The old man's lips twitched upward in a bitter smile. "Take us, for example. My name is Dogol. I was born far to the south in the Sugal sea, near the kingdom of Karal. I'm not sure if you know this or not, but two years ago, the kingdom of Karal was overrun by the Talsh empire. The Sugal sea is now under their control...and from that time, my people have ceased to be Rassharou."

Surina blinked. Dogol said through gritted teeth, "We did not want to be Talsh slaves. We chose to be treated as citizens, like the other people of Karal. We thought that would be better than being chased by pirates until we die.

"But the Talsh empire don't allow their citizens to settle in other countries. In exchange for the protections of citizenship, we have certain obligations. We pay taxes and send our sons to fight in their armies. If you're always tied to land, you can't be called a Rassharou anymore, can you?" Dogol related all of this dispassionately, concealing his emotions. He stared at Surina. "But you and I are the same. If the Talsh empire conquers Sangal, the Rassharou of these waters will suffer the same fate as us."

Dogol lowered his voice and started speaking quickly. "I told you the Talsh empire takes our sons for its armies. They are sent to the Talsh capital. They are called soldiers, but they are hostages. But you—you are Rassharou, a nomadic drifter of the sea. If you sailed to the capital, no one would think it strange or suspicious. You have the potential to become the best possible spy in all of Sangal.

"So go sail the seas of Sangal. Discover how the currents move and connect. Find out how the Island Guardians distribute their resources and armies, in detail. If you do well, you'll be rewarded with more gold than you have ever laid eyes on." He paused. "Help us find a secret way to attack the capital of Sangal."

Surina's body felt frozen through. How had her family ever gotten caught up in something like this?

"Please save me." Surina extended her hand as if searching for something, then found Dogol's hand in the dark and gripped it hard. "Help my family find a way to escape!"

Dogol dropped Surina's hand and shook his head. "That's impossible. Now is the time to keep your head down. If you or your family tried to run away now, you'd only be killed. But if you cooperate, your family and friends—along with the other Rassharou—will likely be given fair treatment."

"Then take me to my family," Surina said. "I want to be with them."

Dogol gripped her hand tightly. "I understand how you feel. This is something I'm begging you to do."

Surina frowned slightly. Dogol's eyes shone in the dark. "The Talsh still don't know you survived. You can be the arrow of our revenge upon them." His voice struck an impassioned note. Surina tried to extricate her hand from his grasp, but he just held on. "Listen. My son is dead. He was killed in a border skirmish. Do you understand? To the west of Talsh is a desert wasteland far from the sea. That's where my son died. A Rassharou dying on *land!*

"I've dreamed of it so many times—my son's corpse dried out and desiccated in the desert sun. You can't imagine the pain, the agony, of knowing Rassharou are being dragged off to that horrible place and killed..."

Dogol's eyes swam with tears. "I hate the Talsh. They killed my son. But no matter how much I hate them, what can I do? I can't destroy the Talsh; they're too strong. So I became their vanguard, to help the other Rassharou that become their war prisoners as best I can."

Dogol took a deep breath and looked directly into Surina's eyes. "You have been given to us by the goddess of the sea to be the instrument of our revenge. I will use you to bring down the Talsh empire in a single blow—a small one, perhaps, but it will have a devastating impact.

"From here, sail to the capital. Tell the Sangal King everything I told you. The Talsh empire is tremendously strong, but the King of Sangal knows the ocean well. It is possible that Sangal will win. If they do win, the Rassharou from the Sugal sea might be able to migrate to the waters of the Yaltash. Do you understand what I'm asking? Right now, we are all holding our breaths. We are being manipulated, so we're within our rights to manipulate them right back. So many of our sons have died on land. We have watched and suffered in silence long enough."

Surina took a step back hurriedly, freeing her hand. "You can't ask me to do such an outrageously difficult thing. I can't do it."

Dogol laughed. "I don't know... I think precisely because you are who you are, and because of how you appear, you will be able to do it. You're just a poor girl, and that in itself will deflect many suspicious

eyes. And besides, you don't have much choice. If you help us, we'll give you food and access to a ship so that you can leave this place. If your father has been injured, we will find him and treat his wounds. I am leader of the vanguard of the Talsh empire. I have the power to do this.

"If your father has cooperated with the Talsh, he will be sent to one of two islands to work. I know where these islands are. The day when you can see your family again will come. It may take a few years, but certainly that's better than never seeing them again?"

Dogol smiled faintly as he spoke. He gazed steadily at Surina with a light in his eyes. "If you refuse, all we'll do is leave you here. You'll never know where your family is. If things go badly, your father might die of his wounds. I have lost my son, so I understand how you feel, but I'm under no obligation to save you or your family. Not without something in return.

"So what will you do?" he asked. "Will you accept this deal, or refuse it?"

Surina wanted to tell Dogol that he was crazy, but she was so terrified for her family that she couldn't bring herself to say such a thing. If she accepted, she would have to go on a long journey on a boat that was not her father's. She was scared, but she didn't see any better options. In exchange for aid for herself and her family, she was willing to give almost anything.

She drew herself up, gathered her courage, and answered in the same manner an adult woman of the Rassharou would when accepting a contract: "I accept the deal."

Dogol grinned happily at her.

"Well, then, miss, let's get you a ship. The three Talsh spy ships patrolling this island will leave tomorrow morning. There will be no others until noon. Tomorrow morning, climb up the cliffs and look down to make sure the ships have left." As he spoke, he dragged his rowboat down the beach and into the shallows of an inland creek. "When we capture your ships, we’re usually ordered to destroy and sink them in order to prevent information about our movements from

spreading. There is a ship at the tip of the coast, in a cave, that we sunk but did not destroy. Once you relieve it of some of its weight, it should float again.

"The cave where the ship is concealed is one that the Talsh usually use as a waste pit. No one should think to look for you or the ship there. After you recover the ship, the next part is up to you. You are still young, but you are a strong Rassharou. I am certain you will survive."

Dogol frowned suddenly and lowered his voice. "And I will teach you everything I know about the Talsh army. Its movements, its strategies, its numbers—listen well. This information is worth a barrel of gold to the King of Sangal." Dogol took her hand again and began tracing out a crude map of the three spy vessels on the island as well as the location of the sunken ship. Creating and memorizing maps based on hand tracings was an art among the Rassharou people. The direction of the wrist was north. The middle finger pointed south. The knuckles pointed to landmarks—or, for larger maps, to commonly known currents and islands in the area.

When he was done teaching her the placement of the ships, he covered her hand with his own. "Don't report to the wrong person by mistake. Not all who say they are Sangal subjects are loyal to the King. If you tell the wrong person, not just you, but your entire family may be killed."

When she understood the precariousness of her situation, Surina's heart raced and she trembled all over.

Dogol’s expression softened. He squeezed her hand once more for reassurance, then let her go without saying another word. He stood up, said "Good luck," and left her there.

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Surina managed to take over the sunken ship, just as Dogol had promised. Dredging the ship up all on her own was a challenge, though;

she frequently broke down in tears. Concealed in the cave with the ship were food and water: smoked meat and fish, and confections and sweets that the poor Rassharou girl had never laid eyes on before. There were also two thousand ja coins, which were the largest denomination of coin that she knew of.

When she discovered the money, a warm feeling spread through Surina's chest. As she looked around the cave one final time, she remembered Dogol's face just before he'd left her. She now believed that he would keep his promise to help her father.

She also remembered the moment when his expression had softened at seeing her fear. She wished she would have hugged him then—cried and broken down and begged him to take her to her family. She thought about that moment over and over again. If she had broken down, he may have given up on using her and taken her to her father as she'd asked. She wondered why she hadn't done it, even though she'd wanted to. Feelings of regret consumed her.

Thinking about that moment made her anxious beyond description, but she did have hope—a small one. When Dogol had told her not to mistake her contact, she had imagined the person Dogol described in her mind. It was a boy—a boy she knew well. They'd gone deep water fishing together, dived together, played together—he was her friend. And he was someone that would never betray the King.

Prince Tarsan.

But Prince Tarsan was currently at the royal palace. The Prince Tarsan on Kalsh island and the Prince Tarsan of the palace were as different as the sea and the clouds. A poor Rassharou girl could never expect to meet a royal prince on the beach outside the capital.

"I wish I'd cried and given up after all. It's impossible. I can't do this."

But she'd already agreed. No matter her regrets, she had no choices left.

And so, Surina's solitary sea voyage began.

Chapter 5 -

The Eyes of the Nayugul Raita

Chagum always loved trying foreign foods. He was welcomed with a feast after his long journey. The specially prepared dishes fried in unfamiliar oils and flavored with exotic spices made his nose twitch. After spending three days in Sangal, he become accustomed to the new tastes and smells and considered everything delicious.

At meals, women of the Sangal court sat around him, treating him with refined manners and graceful service. He was a bit embarrassed by this practice, but apparently it was a Sangal custom for these women to seat and entertain guests that wished to discuss politics or affairs of state. Listening to them talk, it seemed to Chagum that the royal family agreed about most things, though they had their fine points of disagreement.

Shuga found it hard to relax with both him and Chagum being physically boxed in by all these women. Sometimes when he caught Chagum's eye, he got the sense that Chagum was secretly laughing at him.

To Chagum, simply listening to the situations and experiences of people from places he'd never been was fascinating. Clothing and appearance varied as much as the guests' experiences of life did; the shape and face of every foreign dignitary was completely unique. Chagum became obsessed with understanding all of it.

He had a particular interest in the King of Kanbal, who was usually seated on the opposite end of the banquet hall. He was the King of Balsa's homeland. Somehow he seemed weaker than Chagum had imagined, but his features did remind Chagum a bit of Balsa. This was

the son of the King that had turned Balsa's life upside down; when Chagum realized that he wasn't entirely sure what to feel.

After a while, servers removed the meat and fish dishes from the tables and replaced them with wine and fruit. Guests stirred in their seats and exclaimed in admiration when they saw the fruit: it was brightly colored, ripe, and two or three times as large as any fruit that grew on the northern continent. Chagum took a bite of a huge red peach and was amazed at its overwhelming sweetness.

"Sangal is certainly a wealthy country," Chagum said.

Saluna, seated at his side, smiled at this declaration. "Wealthy in some ways, but not in others. We royal women of Sangal visit every island in the kingdom, and while many are rich, some are small and impoverished, lacking even the absolute basics for for day-to-day survival."

Chagum turned his head toward her. Shuga, remembering the small fishing village where he'd grown up, asked without thinking: "Basic things like water?"

Saluna's eyes widened a fraction. "Just so. You understand us well. Most people would have guessed grain, or rice." She paused. "We are surrounded by water, yet the main resource we lack is sufficient clean drinking water. There are islands with clear clean springs, but these are not enough to provide for all our needs. That is why we collect and and make use of rainwater."

"Really? We do the same thing on the small islands off the coast of New Yogo," Shuga said.

After the fruit and wine had been served, many of the guests changed seats to visit friends and acquaintances at other tables. Chagum, still speaking to Shuga and Saluna, saw a shadow pass over Saluna's face. He looked over his shoulder and saw Prince Tarsan standing there, holding a wine jug.

Because of what had happened on the first night of the ceremonies, Tarsan had been ordered to repent and reflect on his errors in private,

so he had not attended any gatherings for the past two days. Now, though, he was here.

Chagum wondered anxiously about what Tarsan must think of him, since he was responsible (intentionally or not) for Tarsan's punishment. But Tarsan's expression was free of any darkness or ill intent.

"Please pardon my behavior at the Martial Arts Demonstration Ceremony," he said a little forcefully while pouring white wine into Chagum's glass.

"...Thank you. But please stop apologizing. There's no need," Chagum said. He picked up his wine glass, took a sip, and choked a little. It was the first time he'd drunk such a bitter wine. Hiding his embarrassment, he worked on imitating the behavior of the adults around him. He accepted the wine jug from Tarsan and poured Tarsan a glass of the same wine. When he finished pouring, he got the sense that he had just done something very adult and grown-up, and felt as if he'd crossed some invisible line. The idea depressed him.

Tarsan downed his entire glass in one gulp and showed no signs of choking.

"Prince Tarsan," Chagum said, "do you always drink such strong wine?"

Seeing an expression like admiration on Chagum's face, Tarsan's mood visibly improved. "This isn't strong, not for us. Something like saccharon—that's distilled liquor—is hot enough to burn all the way down. The second I drink it I feel like my head's on fire." He paused. "Sangal men love alcohol. I've been drinking since I was very young."

"Oh?"

"If you're on board ship and you're drinking, it's hard to tell if you're seasick or just drunk."

Chagum laughed. "But can you keep your balance well aboard ship if you're drunk?"

Tarsan's lips twitched upward. "I'm used to being drunk on board ship, you see. I feel like I wobble more when I'm on land and sober."

"So that's why when they're back on land, men drink to feel like they're at sea?" Saluna asked with a touch of sarcasm. Tarsan moved to pour more wine into Chagum's glass, but Saluna stopped his hand with her own. This was her signal to stop pouring before something terrible happened, like Chagum getting drunk and sick and Tarsan getting drunk and violent. Tarsan sat across from Chagum and changed the topic of conversation.

"Your Majesty, what kind of martial arts do you practice? Are they unique to New Yogo?"

Chagum's smile was difficult to interpret. Chagum could feel Shuga's concerned eyes on him from his place at the table. Looking between Chagum and Tarsan, Shuga realized that they had more in common than seemed apparent at first glance. If Chagum sincerely disliked Tarsan, he would have no trouble putting up and maintaining his mask of the saintly and untouchable royal being. Shuga knew that Chagum only showed his true self to people he got along with. He was still concerned, though, about Chagum forgetting his image a little too much.

"Well... I really only know a little of one technique, called chiki."

"Oh?" Saluna asked. Both Chagum and Tarsan looked at her in surprise.

"Are you familiar with chiki, sister?" Tarsan asked.

"Only the name. I've heard it is a Kanbal art." Saluna looked at Chagum with an expression of interest. "Is it really real? We have heard of your great exploits in Sangal, of course—about you saving a water spirit and preventing a drought. But the details of your adventures, and what is true and just tales, I cannot tell..."

Seeing her floundering for words, Chagum threw her a lifeline. "I imagine it must all sound like an over-embellished fairy tale."

Saluna blushed a little. "As you say. I’m sorry. Until today, I had not even considered that a practitioner of an ancient Kanbal combat art would visit our kingdom, to say nothing of your role in stories surrounding the water spirit. I’ve heard many tales and legends of my

own people that seem as unlikely as what I've heard of your story, but what I have heard is also far more detailed than our legends. It is sung that you were saved by a Kanbal woman, a great warrior and martial artist."

At Saluna's words, Chagum's heart beat faster.

"A song?" Chagum asked. "What happened to me is...a song?"

"Yes. It is in Yogoese, of course. A singer with a beautiful voice came to the capital once to sing it."

Chagum couldn't prevent his face from reddening. He was fairly sure he knew who the singer must have been. He was a man with a destiny even more mysterious than Chagum's. Having met him once, Chagum believed that the man only sang of frivolous matters, but it seemed that he'd made a song about Chagum and Balsa—and had traveled to other countries to sing it. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. For Yugno to treat his life so casually—!

"You probably shouldn't believe that song," Chagum said. "The singer must have made it all sound like a grand adventure—wind on rough seas, persevering to the end, and all that."

"I'm more interested in the truth than the song."

Chagum looked into Saluna's hopeful eyes and felt a part of himself retreat. Whenever he discussed state matters or politics, he always stilled himself to a state of unflappable composure. He felt himself snapping into this state now. His experiences with the water spirit and Balsa were deeply personal, but Saluna had asked him in good faith, so he began to tell his story in the same way that he might narrate a legend from a foreign country: simply, and unemotionally.

Chagum told the story of a spirit from another world that granted this world the blessing of rain. He explained that this spirit laid eggs, and that those eggs were pursued and devoured by monsters--all except for the one he'd carried. He told the story of the guardian of the spirit.

Tarsan and Saluna listened eagerly, leaning in toward him as he spoke. Chagum used great care to excise the parts of the story where his

father had sent assassins after him. He twisted some facts around other personal circumstances as well. The result, from his point of view, was an utterly dispassionate rendering of a fairy tale.

"I was causing so many problems for everyone because of the egg, but I couldn't think of anything to do to fix things except run away. On my own, I couldn't run very far. I was only eleven, and I'd never left the palace before. The person that found me and rescued me against all odds was the person you mentioned, Saluna—the female bodyguard from Kanbal named Balsa."

Tarsan looked at him in disbelief. "A *female* bodyguard?"

Chagum's eyes shone with delight. "Prince Tarsan, if you ever have the opportunity to see Balsa fight, I'm sure it would leave a lasting impression. There are many fine warriors in New Yogo, but I've never seen a better one than her."

Prince Tarsan grunted as he remembered the incident that resulted in his hidden blow being deflected by the comparatively tiny Chagum. "So this Balsa taught you chiki, right?"

"Yes. Mainly for protection, though I only grasped the basic principles of the technique from her—she knew many others. Balsa is an incredibly strong warrior. To see her with a spear is a sight to behold. Many people know her as Balsa, the short spear wielder."

Chagum's expression lightened considerably after his uncomfortable narration. Saluna and Tarsan looked like they were having fun as well. They completely forgot about the wine in front of them and became engrossed in the conversation.

But suddenly, their conversation was interrupted by the loud chime of a bell. The guests relaxing at the feast wondered aloud to one another what was going on. All eyes turned toward the King of Sangal.

The King of Sangal stood up. "Everyone, I am sorry if this interruption has troubled you. I shall explain the meaning behind this disturbance."

Every conversation in the room ceased as people leaned forward in their seats to hear what the King had to say.

"That bell rings whenever a certain personage has been sighted arriving in the harbor. In our land, there is a legend passed down from ancient times about the Nayugul Raita." In a voice that carried, he told the assembled guests about the water-dwelling Nayugul Raita. These sea-dwelling creatures supposedly lived at the bottom of the ocean in another world; one of them would occasionally take possession of a young girl using some kind of magic. "The personage that has just arrived is one such girl. She is possessed by a Nayugul Raita."

The guests and foreign dignitaries all began talking at once.

"I know this may cause discomfort and concern for many of you," the King of Sangal went on, "but in Sangal this girl is considered to be a messenger of the god of the sea. She may appear to be a filthy fisherman's daughter, and having to welcome her among you grieves me to the heart, but you must understand that she must be treated with the highest respect. I beg you humbly to cooperate in this matter."

Chagum's eyes fixed on Shuga. Shuga stared back. Without words, they understood one another: *Nayugul? An ocean in another world?*

Chagum had only just spoken of something similar to Saluna and Tarsan. He was familiar with spirits and creatures belonging to another world, having hosted one himself. The indigenous people of New Yogo, the Yakoo, called the other world Nayugu.

Shuga's heart pounded loud in his ears. He'd dedicated his life to the study of Tendo, the magic by which Star Readers interpreted the heavens. In the Star Palace, he read omens and signs to help guide New Yogo in the right direction. The people of New Yogo had originally fled from the southern continent. They'd founded a new nation on the northern continent, displacing many of the Yakoo that lived there. The Yakoo already possessed their own kind of magic; they generally considered Tendo as something of a foolish notion. Consequently, they ignored it completely, along with the Star Readers that practiced it—with a few rare exceptions.

When Chagum had gotten mixed up in the matter of the water spirit from Nayugu, Shuga had met Torogai, the great Yakoo magic

weaver...and had been irresistibly drawn to Yakoo magic. He now met with Torogai in secret. In exchange for him teaching her Tendo, she taught him the magic of the Yakoo people. If this exchange were ever discovered, the repercussions would be severe. It was a dangerous correspondence that they shared, but Shuga valued gaining a greater understanding of the world more than he feared any danger. It was probably the scholar in him. He thought Chagum shared much the same quality, to an extent.

I should be more careful, Shuga thought. Chagum had gotten involved in the matter of Torogai, too, although he hadn't wanted him to. He had let slip his dealings with Torogai to Chagum, but now he wished he'd restrained himself better.

"The Eyes of the Nayugul Raita is a girl from Kalsh, isn't it, sister?" Prince Tarsan asked in a troubled tone. "Do you know who it is?"

Saluna seemed to struggle with her answer. Noticing her expression, Tarsan's face clouded over. "You know. I'm sure of it. Who is it?"

"Tarsan, the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita is no longer a person. Who they were before is what you must be asking."

Tarsan fell silent. He interpreted his sister's curt discomfort as her way of not losing her composure in front of their guests. She was communicating using her expression alone that the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita was a girl he knew well.

But who? Who was this girl that would be feasted and feted before being thrown to her death in the sea?

In a soft voice, Chagum said, "Please forgive a foreigner's ignorance. I have a question, but I do not know if it would be appropriate to ask it." He paused.

Tarsan looked at Chagum. "Ask."

"Well," Chagum began, "His Majesty just told us all that the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita has come to be celebrated and hosted and respected,

and...I'm not sure why that would make everyone so upset," Chagum said. "Everyone seems so nervous. Why is that?"

Saluna sighed. "Forgive us. The timing for the announcement was poor, with us all in the middle of a party. And we are unused to disciplining our emotions before guests," Saluna said with an apologetic smile. "What I have to say may make you uncomfortable, but I will try to explain as best I can."

Saluna adopted a detached tone and told Chagum the particulars of the legends surrounding the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita. She explained why the girl would be celebrated and revered before being cast to her death in the ocean.

Chagum donned his own polite mask, hiding behind it so that he would not display his own agitation. Controlling himself was difficult. This girl had been dragged into a fate that could not be changed, and the result of it was that she'd be killed. She reminded him far too much of himself.

"That's..." Chagum tried to calm himself. down. "Is there no way for the girl to be saved? Must she be thrown in the ocean?" He searched for signs of hope on Saluna and Tarsan's faces.

Saluna's shoulders collapsed inwards. "If the girl's soul returns to her body before the night of the final ritual, she will not be killed. If her soul returns and that of the Nayugul Raita departs, there is no reason to cast her into the sea. I do remember one time in our history when a girl was spared this way."

"Then I hope her soul returns," Chagum said.

Tarsan's sunburned face reddened slightly. "She must be one of the girls I was raised with on Kalsh. She must be."

Chagum saw true solicitousness and concern in Tarsan's eyes. That surprised him a little; Tarsan was supposedly a prince of high rank, but apparently he’d been raised outside the palace among the children of common fishermen. More than that, he knew and cared about those people enough to genuinely worry about this girl. Chagum felt a strange

kinship between them form. They both had strong emotional ties to the common people of their lands.

The sound of a Sangal shell flute called a shaguram echoed throughout the hall.

The guests saw the shadow of a small figure surrounded by soldiers enter the hall. Whispers of unease passed from guest to guest. The girl's clothes were beautiful, but her head was entirely covered in white cloth. All that could be seen of her face were the outlines of her nose and mouth.

"Eyes of the Nayugul Raita, welcome to the royal palace! Please, come in and be welcome among us." At the King of Sangal's booming proclamation, two of the soldiers surrounding the girl seized her hands and guided her through the hall.

She walked like a soulless doll. Tarsan stared fixedly at her as she passed by the tables and gasped when he noticed a a crude ring wrapped around one of her fingers, formed of polished shell. He'd made it himself and given it to Eshana as a toy after one of his deep water fishing expeditions on Kalsh.

Eshana! Is it her? He glanced at his sister. She nodded sadly.

Chagum didn't notice the exchange between Saluna and Tarsan at all. The moment he looked at the girl, a sharp, cold pain spread out from his forehead to the rest of his body. He clenched his fists. As she passed near him, a familiar smell reached him: one he had never forgotten. It was the same smell the water spirit had given off when it had possessed his body—the smell of the water of Nayugu.

Chapter 6 - Eshana's Ring

The flames of the candles lit inside the palace's salu lamps wavered. These lamps were made of large orange shells with naturally curved-in sides that blocked out wind and spread light more widely and evenly than ordinary lamps could. The shells that these lamps were made of were exceedingly rare, so salu lamps were a luxury that was only available at the royal palace.

Chagum sat in his rooms, not in a chair, but on one of the raised cushions with a low back support that had been brought from New Yogo. He balanced on one knee and leaned back in his seat. He had cleared the rooms of most people shortly before, so now it was just him and Shuga, who was looking at him with a complicated expression.

"There is nothing to be done, Your Majesty," Shuga said. "This is not your problem to solve."

Chagum frowned at Shuga's severe tone. "Why not? This is about saving someone's life. That girl definitely smells just like the waters of Nayugu. She's like I was. There has to be something we can do."

Chagum rubbed his arms in an unconscious gesture of self-comfort. "I remember everything. I remember how it felt as the Nyunga Ro Im grew inside me—it was like my soul was getting smaller and smaller. Sometimes I'd lose all sensation in my arms and legs; I couldn't see or hear... I lost control of all of my senses. The Nyunga Ro Im took over my mind and moved me without my knowledge or consent.

"In my case, the Nyunga Ro Im was always working desperately to save me, and itself, when it did things like that. And I was able to see another world—but it wasn't Nayugu, and it wasn't Sagu. The world I saw was a strange one, where the two worlds overlapped. My body could be walking up a mountain slope while my soul was underwater in Nayugu—under so far and so deep that the clear blue water seemed to have no bottom. But I could see parts of Sagu when I was there, too—uprooted trees floating past, or fish that couldn't see me..."

Chagum lifted his eyes and looked at Shuga sitting across from him. "That girl can't see, doesn't seem to hear, and moves as if her soul has left her body. She's just like—"

"She's not like you were," Shuga says. "She is different. Your Majesty, please be calm and think. That girl can't do anything for herself at all, can she? She is simply led around by others. In your case, the egg of the Nyunga Ro Im only took over your body to keep you safe and to get you to the location where it needed to hatch. A spirit like that is not manipulating this girl. She does not appear to be in control of her own movements at all. She is entirely dependent on other people to direct her."

Even if their situations weren't the same, one thing still disturbed Chagum deeply, and that was the white cloth that had covered the girl's eyes. When he'd first seen that, he'd felt a sensation like cold dread. He tried to put this fear into words, but as he struggled to do so he realized that Shuga was right. The egg of the Nyunga Ro Im had possessed him when it had wanted to go home, or when it had needed to keep him safe, but otherwise it had allowed him control over his own movements. And when he had been possessed by the spirit, trying to lead him anywhere the egg didn't want to go would not have worked—he would have shaken off any guides and ran to wherever the egg wanted him to be. Putting a cloth over his eyes would probably have had no effect.

"But even if that's true—" Chagum tried to argue, but Shuga calmly interrupted him.

"Your Majesty. You have said that you desire to save this girl's life. Let's say for the sake of argument that she is exactly as you were. How would you save her?"

"I would explain what has happened to her to the King."

"And what evidence would you present?"

Chagum was at a loss. He understood what Shuga was saying: his experience was his own and didn't necessarily apply to this situation.

Just because his and Eshana's experiences resembled one another did not mean they were the same.

Shuga said in a low voice, "I have been learning about Nayugu from Master Torogai for four years. There are things about Nayugu that even she does not know. There probably are other spirits very like the water spirit that laid its egg in you in this world. Certainly, there is knowledge of such spirits that has been passed down since before the founding of New Yogo."

"Then we should at least try to verify that it's the same kind of spirit," Chagum said. "Shuga, that's what I want to do. You learned how to do the Soul Call from Torogai, didn't you? Just try it, once, for me—please? Try to call that girl's soul back."

"Your Majesty—"

"I know I'm asking you to do something dangerous," Chagum said, interrupting him. "But if we just sit here and do nothing, that little girl is going to be thrown to her death. When I think about it, I..."

"Your Majesty." Shuga extended his hands and placed them on Chagum's shoulders. Chagum looked at Shuga with an expression of shock. Touching the Crown Prince without permission or cause was considered a grave offense for someone as low in status as Shuga. But Chagum did not protest; he was stunned silent by Shuga's expression.

Shuga enunciated each of his next words carefully, but his voice was barely louder than a whisper. "Calm down, and consider the position you are in. You are a foreign guest at the coronation celebration of a new king. Do you really intend to flout the customs and beliefs of this place, even after the King of Sangal has begged for your cooperation?"

Going against the King's wishes on the matter of the girl was likely not something that would be easily forgiven.

We're talking about saving someone's life, Chagum thought, *but because of who I am, my hands are tied. There has to be something I can do.* Chagum's chest hurt. He was profoundly irritated with himself. He felt helpless to do anything at all.

Slowly, carefully, Shuga removed his hands from Chagum's shoulders. As he did, Chagum's irritation collapsed to nothing. Of course Shuga was right. Shuga always thought of Chagum's safety and how best to guide him first and foremost. But that didn't make him feel better.

Chagum clenched his fists so tight that he left the impressions of his nails on his palms. Even after Shuga withdrew, Chagum couldn't sleep and stood staring out of a window in his rooms. He lifted the slatted shutters on the window and let in the sea air. It ruffled Chagum's hair, fluttered his clothes and cooled the sweat drying on his skin. It was the middle of the night, but the weather was still warm. The cool breeze carried a touch of salt. Beyond the palace and the rows of houses outside, Chagum could see the pitch-dark surface of the ocean, lit faintly silver by moonlight.

While he stared at the moonlit waves, the sound of the wind increased in volume and took on a cadence that was like a melody. Suddenly, sharp cold pain spread from his forehead to the rest of his body. He blinked; when he opened his eyes he thought he was seeing an illusion.

Water the color of lapis lazuli hung suspended from the night sky outside his window. He was soaked in the scent of the water spirit; it was the exact smell he remembered. He felt somehow that he was repeating something that had happened before.

The waves in the sky were not the same color or shape as the waves in the ordinary ocean. They were lighter, like waves lit by the sun at dawn. Then the window, the floor, the room—everything vanished as Chagum was sucked into the bright blue waves.

Inside that vast expanse of blue were innumerable tiny points of light. The green-yellow lights danced through the water, flitting past and around him, leaving trails of illumination in their wake. Their paths were as true and straight as arrows. The glowing light they gave off brightened when they moved and dimmed when they stood still, making them appear like fireflies in the dark.

Yona Ro Gai...the water dwellers!

Chagum remembered the water dwellers of Nayugu. They often lived in large groups and danced together joyfully just as they were now. He heard a high-pitched song with a gentle melody, delicate and lovely enough to pluck at the strings of his heart...an irresistibly entrancing song.

From the depths of the sea below him, voices beyond number sang this song. Lights danced and swirled around him, leaving bright trails through the water. They seemed to be coming closer to him.

As he looked at the lights, he noticed that he was situated on a high undersea cliff. The ocean floor spread out beneath him, as bright and illumined as if it were high noon. Nothing seemed so beautiful to him as that ocean floor. He felt like he was being invited there and that he should go—just swim down and...

Something pulled him sharply back to himself. Chagum looked down at his hands and saw the signet ring of the Crown Prince of New Yogo around his middle finger. The music, the water, and the dancing lights faded away, leaving him standing at the window of his room once more.

Chagum put his hands on the cool windowsill and sucked in a harsh breath while continuing to stare at his hands. His heart pounded so hard it hurt. What was that? Had he been in Nayugu, just now?

This palace must be in Nayugu's ocean.

Nayugu overlapped with Sagu. Even if a place was on land in Sagu, it could easily be underwater in Nayugu. Chagum knew this, but he

didn't understand how he had gone to Nayugu so easily. Even magic weavers couldn't see Nayugu without making special preparations first. It was possible that his time with the water spirit had made him sensitive to Nayugu in some way—enough for him to see it like that. But the spirit's egg had long since hatched and left him, so he shouldn't be connected to Nayugu anymore.

He revisited what he'd just seen in his mind and remembered something else. Blown on the wind, in the in-between place between Sagu and Nayugu, he had seen a shigu salua flower.

Could it have been that?

The shigu salua flower bloomed at the places connecting the worlds. He'd seen the same flower when he'd gone to the Land of Feasting with the water spirit. But he didn't see any shigu salua here, in his rooms.

Maybe shigu salua aren't the only thing that can open the door between worlds.

Piercing cold spread through his chest like ice. He felt unsteady on his feet. He had a feeling like a door in his mind had just unlocked. If he opened that door, he could go to Nayugu at any time. But why did he feel such cold dread at such a possibility? He took shallow breaths to calm down so that he could try to discover the source of his uneasiness.

Eventually, he framed his sense of dread as something like a fear of loss. Like two measures of salt on a scale, Sagu and Nayugu existed in equilibrium. By opening the door, he could tip the scale. If either side tipped too far, Chagum had the feeling that one side or the other would completely disappear.

He didn't know how he understood these things. It was just a feeling. And he still didn't entirely understand how he'd been lured to Nayugu's ocean in the first place.

Why is the world like this? Why was I born like this? The last question was the hardest one for him to grapple with.

What he did understand was that the royal palace of Sangal was at the bottom of the ocean in Nayugu, and that people like Chagum that

had spent time between the two worlds before could hear the voices of the water dwellers. So much seemed obvious.

But that meant that the little girl must have heard those voices, too—and been dragged all the way down to the bottom of the sea in Nayugu. Chagum shook all over.

Maybe her soul can't return. Maybe she's trapped.

Nayugu was very beautiful, but human thoughts—and even human lives—held about as much worth there as a grain of sand. When he considered the egg's unrelenting single-mindedness when it had taken him over, he understood what his life must have been worth in Nayugu. It had only used him so that it could hatch. But he did not believe that the water spirit was evil. Like a child reflexively obeying a parent, it had been reactionary to another's will.

Chagum had been close to dying, more than once. If the egg had not saved him, he would have died for sure—the monsters pursuing him would have ripped him open to devour the egg, and he would be dead now.

He thought about the ethereal, majestic beauty of the bottom of Nayugu's ocean. It would be so easy for people to be lured there, as he'd almost been. People who were successfully lured there were like pebbles dropped above water, inexorably sinking into the deep, never to surface again.

That seemed true of ordinary people, but if it was *him*—maybe he could chase down the girl. It was likely that he could find the girl in Nayugu. But then he'd have to open the door in his heart to enter Nayugu...and he feared the consequences.

He could find her. He was sure of it. But he wasn't sure he'd be able to bring either of them back to Sagu afterwards.

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Prince Tarsan was also passing a sleepless night. When he remembered Eshana's radiant smile after he'd given her the seashell ring, he couldn't even attempt to sleep. His brother and his oldest sister's husband, the Island Guardian Adol, had guessed at his true feelings, casting him scornful smiles as Eshana had been led past him. Those smiles had seemed to say that a prince had no need to care for a fisherman's daughter.

Brother, that's enough. Leave it, Tarsan thought. The ceiling above him was lavishly embedded with shells the color of mother-of-pearl. A faint light like starlight reflected faintly from it. Tarsan thought it looked a little like the night sky seen from the deck of a ship.

On board a ship, the orders of the captain had similar weight to those of the King of Sangal. If a captain of the ship was experienced and knowledgeable, Tarsan would obey their orders without a scrap of hesitation, even though he was a prince. Sailing over a bottomless ocean with a boundless sky overhead, one's comrades became very much like a family that would live and die for one another.

Even though his brother was about to become the King of Sangal, he was sure that Karnan had never felt such camaraderie with a ship's crew in his entire life. Tarsan had been raised on Kalsh, a tiny windswept island not far from the capital. Long ago, Tarsan's ancestors had set sail from Kalsh. Of course, they'd had to conceal the fact that they were pirates in order to move freely. So much was common knowledge.

But his ancestors had been no ordinary pirates. No one would be willing to follow a leader that only took from their followers while giving nothing in return. Tarsan's ancestors understood that precept well and generously rewarded everyone that gave them faithful service. As their followers and wealth increased, the rulers of Sangal became wise in their treatment of others.

If Sangal's rulers have prospered, it's because they never threw away the hearts of the common people, Tarsan thought. He believed his ancestors would have understood him. In order to unite the strong-

willed peoples of the sea, the King of Sangal could not afford to be aloof and distant like the rulers of the northern countries.

If only my uncle were still alive. He remembered Yunan well. As the younger brother of the King and High General of Sangal, he had been a true man of the sea. Yunan had told him often as he'd grown up that the King and the people were bound by strong ties, as close as family. "If you understand the hearts of your people, they will believe in you. If you advise your brother well, the two of you will lead this country in the right direction."

Tarsan had spent much of his time living, working, and playing among the common people of Sangal. The Island Guardian Adol often said behind his back that Tarsan would have been happier as a fisherman than a prince, but Tarsan didn't care what he said. Besides, it was true.

For his part, Tarsan thought that Adol should have more direct contact with the people he ruled. He had married into the royal family, which seemed to fill him with pride—pride that Tarsan wasn't sure was deserved. He looked down his nose at the people of Kalsh. Tarsan didn't think that a man like that, who not only didn't know the hearts of his people but had no interest in knowing them, could be relied upon to lead or defend his people.

Soldiers that fought for the Island Guardians, and for the King himself, were almost all the sons of fishermen. Tarsan's personal guards had all come from Kalsh and its nearby islands. Every one of them was considered a Yaltash Shuri: a brother of the sea. If he didn't understand their motivations and convictions deeply, he was certain that he wouldn't be able to lead them.

One by one, he recalled the weather-beaten faces of all the Yaltash Shuri that he knew. Some served the King, or an Island Guardian, or himself, but their first loyalty was always to the sea. That was the source of their strength. He had been raised, not as a prince, but as an ordinary boy and man that had to earn his place just like everyone else.

The first time he had demonstrated sufficient skill at diving and the strength of his arm with a harpoon, he had been formally recognized by the Yaltash Shuri as one of their own. That had been one of the happiest days of his life. The men that guarded him now were those same men; he trusted them utterly and knew they would do as he ordered because they trusted him, too.

As he remembered the place he'd grown up, the face of Eshana rose up in his mind's eye. *I wonder what Yata would do now.* Tarsan remembered him now with respect and a twinge of sadness.

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Eshana's father Yata was about Karnan's age when he died. He was an incredible diver and fisherman. People said that he'd received the breath of the Nayugul Lighters as a birthright. No one could match him at diving or deep-sea fishing. He could hold his breath for so long that people teased him about being part fish. He could also dive to the bottom of the ocean floor to depths that many people couldn't manage, due to the pressure. Even the form of his dive elicited universal admiration. He would jump straight up and then out like an arrow, all speed, leaving behind a trail of tiny white bubbles in the water behind him.

Yata was a man of few words, but when he laughed, the whole room had laughed with him. A large group of people, usually children, followed him around during the day. He taught them everything he knew about diving and fishing.

Yata taught many of the island's children how to swim. Tarsan was one of those children, along with one or two others that he considered fierce diving competitors. Aside from Yata himself, the only person he knew of that could hold their breath longer underwater than he could was a Rassharou girl named Surina.

Yata always praised Surina. When he was very young, it had galled Tarsan to constantly lose to Surina, but Surina was always a gracious winner and a genuinely kind person. She also took no personal pride in

her own diving skills. Tarsan and Surina learned diving and fishing from Yata together; eventually, they became good friends.

Tarsan remembered diving to great depths and feeling absolutely terrified as he seemed to shrink smaller and smaller in the cold dark sea as his breath ran out. At those times, Surina would look him in the eye and smile. He ate with Surina at Yata's house and they played with Eshana together. Eshana greatly resembled her father. She wasn't a talkative child, but when she laughed her face lit up with a cheerful light bright enough to shine all the way to the ocean floor. She was adorable, and adored.

When Yata failed to come home after a storm at sea half a year ago, Tarsan stayed up all night with Eshana and Yata's wife Sasha. He prayed with them and all the islanders of Kalsh. Tarsan still couldn't believe that Yata had died at sea, but the facts were the facts: he had died, along with five other strong men.

And now Eshana's life had been snatched away as well. Tarsan could only imagine Sasha's pain at being left all alone.

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Tarsan was just about to drift off to sleep when a something startled him awake. He thought he heard Eshana crying out. It was possible that it was all just a terrible dream, but at the sound of Eshana's wretched sobbing, his blood pounded in his veins.

He bolted out of bed. *Where is Eshana's room?*

She'd probably been placed somewhere along the western edge of the palace in an interior room, based on the status she'd been given. Tarsan steeled his resolve and prepared to leave his rooms.

Just outside his door, his guards maintained their sleepless vigil. If Tarsan went out into the hallway, they would follow him. He took a step back and silently lowered himself out of his window onto the stone ground of the courtyard below. He took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness outside, then started walking.

There would probably be priestesses and soldiers in and around Eshana's room. Tarsan didn’t want to be seen, so he had no intention of entering her room if he could help it. His plan was to peek into her window from below to make sure that she wasn't crying. If she was crying, it might be a sign that her soul had returned to her body. Then she wouldn't be the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita any longer; she would just be a terrified or injured little girl.

Tarsan's bare feet were completely soaked by the grass in the courtyard gardens, but he barely noticed. He stopped under the window of Eshana's room and found it wide open. Tarsan put his ear to the wall and listened for any signs of movement on the other side.

Nothing.

He heard absolutely nothing—not crying, not even the sound of Eshana breathing in her sleep. After listening for a little while, Tarsan frowned. If the soldiers and priestesses were still awake, he should hear them moving. It seemed like there were no people in the room.

She must not be here.

Tarsan put both hands on the windowsill of Eshana's room and hoisted himself up. Dimly, as outlines, he identified the figure of Eshana, white cloth still hanging over her head. She stood with her back to him. At first Tarsan thought she was alone, but as his eyes adjusted to the room's total darkness, he realized that she was surrounded by the supine forms of soldiers and priestesses. They were sprawled out on the floor around her as if they were sleeping—or dead.

Tarsan gasped. Even though Eshana couldn't see—could she?—she turned around and faced Tarsan directly. Then she brought her hands up to her still-covered eyes and began to cry.

The sound was so heartbreaking that Tarsan jumped down from the windowsill into the room without thinking. He rushed to Eshana, reaching out for her hand as he said, "Did you come back? Ssh, it's okay now. You're all right. Please don't be scared."

The moment he touched her hand, a sharp pain shot from his hand to his spine. Suddenly he had an agonizing headache. He lost

consciousness before he could call for help.

Tarsan's eyes closed. Moving like a puppet on strings, he removed Eshana's ring from her finger and slipped it onto his own little finger. The ring was so small that he could not push it beyond his first knuckle.

The next morning, Tarsan woke up in his own bed. He'd completely forgotten about sneaking into Eshana's room the previous night. His head felt heavy; his mind wandered in a fog. He had trouble thinking about much of anything.

Tarsan sighed as he left his bed and did not even notice the tiny ring sitting below the first knuckle of his little finger.

Part Two

Chapter 1 - Festival Under the Sea

Surina sailed her ship alone under the light of a full moon. It was just about the time when she would usually find a shallow place to drop anchor and go to sleep for the night. Her heart urged her to hurry; she did not want to stop yet. Surina used the faint light of the moon and stars to navigate past the dark shapes of deserted islands and cut through the blue-black waves.

The ocean had no roads. She couldn't see her destination yet. In order to reach it without getting lost, she had to rely on the constellations, the islands she passed that she knew, and the orientation and movement of the sun during the day.

The closest thing the ocean did have to established paths were sea currents, but their orientations were entirely fixed. Riding a current that flowed in the direction she wanted, she might make excellent time with minimal effort. But she couldn't work against a current on her own. Even a group of adult Rassharou oarsmen wouldn't be able to struggle successfully against a strong current.

She had to find the best current, or series of them, to take her where she needed to go. But where were they? Which currents should she try to find, and which should she avoid? She didn't know. A map of the ocean would probably be a lot more complicated than a map of land.

As she navigated in the half-dark, Surina felt like she was shrinking, dissolving—slowing being sucked into a dream.

She probably had been sucked into a dream, by virtue of falling asleep while steering. She watched, astonished, as the black-blue waves of the sea beneath her transformed themselves into semi-transparent bright blue water. When she leaned forward to look at it closely, she realized that the jewel-toned water had completely swallowed her up. She and her ship were totally submerged beneath the bright blue waves.

Surina was not frightened. She could breathe easily. Her small boat continued to move through the water. Her sails were full, not of wind, but of water that carried the ship along a current.

This strange current is like the wind, Surina thought. Still not knowing if she was dreaming or not, Surina continued to drift along the current, completely underwater, for what felt like a long time. Suddenly, she heard something. She sucked in a breath as she peered down at the ocean floor in the direction of the sound.

In the deep water, innumerable dots of light floated gently, as if suspended there by invisible threads. They darted through the water at great speed, leaving trails of light behind them as they moved. The light they gave off strengthened and lessened by degrees, not like sudden flashes, but like the steady rise-and-fall of a pulse.

When the lights were at their brightest, a subtle, elusive melody like the chiming of bells surrounded Surina on all sides. Each floating light seemed to have its own bell-like voice. The sound of the bells increased in volume, then became softer and more distant as Surina jolted back to herself. She felt like she'd been hit by an advancing wave.

The chorus of bells swelled up again, loud. Surina's skin was suddenly covered in tiny bubbles. *Haven't I heard this song before?* She believed she had. The last time she'd heard it, she'd been afraid. *I mustn't listen to it. I mustn't.*

She remembered someone's warm hands covering her ears to protect her against the song. Her mother's hands.

Surina saw the first rays of the sun spreading out over the iron-gray surface of the ocean above the crystal-clear water surrounding her and her ship. Sea birds called out in harsh voices above her, then flitted down and dipped their wings in the bright blue waves.

Surina saw a number of dark splotches in the distance. As the sun rose, the otherworldly water around her ship melted away, leaving her above the waves sailing on the ordinary ocean. Everything around her was ordinary, as if nothing strange had happened at all.

As she drew closer to them, Surina identified the dots she'd seen in the in the distance as ships: six of them, all gathered at the conflux point of the currents, just where Surina had been separated from her father. In the half-dark, Surina could not make out many details, but she saw the people on board the ships scattering something into the sea. Along the sides of each ship, the dark blue water shone briefly turquoise. Blue-green light swirled out like ripples from the fleet.

"Huh? Are those sandworms?" Surina muttered. She'd sometimes seen these insects used when fishing at night on Kalsh, but she knew they were used more on the southern islands of Sangal, like Kanak. That was where she remembered seeing them first—on Kanak.

Sandworms existed in abundance on the beaches there, each one resembling a tiny grain of sand. When the tide went out, the sandworms were pulled from the beaches into the ocean, along with real sand. At high tide they floated on the water’s surface, glowing in the dark. At night, anything swimming in the water near Kanak—human or fish—was easily visible in the eerie glow of the sandworms' light.

Using sandworms made it easier for fishermen to navigate at night. Some fish were also attracted to the light of the worms, so they made excellent bait.

These ships must have recently come from Kanak island. The number of birds overhead was greatly reduced compared to four days ago. Surina no longer saw the huge school of jagou swimming between the currents, either. The people on the ships were probably using sandworms to lure out more jagou, if there were any.

She needed to tell them about the Talsh ship. She would hate for what had happened to her family to happen to someone else. She sailed closer to the six ships. From what she could see of the people's faces in the half-dark, she thought they seemed puzzled to be approached by a solitary Rassharou girl.

"Great wind we're having!" she called out in the Rassharou language. This was a traditional greeting; the men and

women on the ships repeated it back to her.

"Where is the captain?" she asked. She was so nervous that her chest hurt, but she was determined to warn them. The people on the ships exchanged glances across the water until finally an old man beckoned to Surina. He introduced himself as the Nan Yalga, the leader of this Rassharou fleet.

Surina faced his ship and brought her own vessel close enough to his so that they would be able to hear one another talk. As she came closer, the other ships surrounded her ship and the leader's in a protective circle.

The Nan Yalga seemed farsighted, or perhaps partially blind, based on his distant gaze. His hair had only just gone gray. He was around forty-five or forty-six years old.

"I am a Rassharou, born on Kalsh. My name is Surina," she said politely.

The man nodded at her and said curtly, "I'm Tado."

"Please forgive me for interrupting your fishing," Surina said. "But I don't think the jagou are here anymore."

Tado's eyebrows shot up. "How do you know?"

Surina licked her dry lips, reviewed recent events in her mind, and began to speak. She told the Rassharou about the huge school of jagou that had been there four days previously—how they'd been carried to the conflux along the Sararou current to the southwest. As she spoke, Tado's expression became less guarded, but he still seemed puzzled by the fact that she was out here all by herself.

Surina took a deep breath and told Tado and the others how she'd come to be alone.

Suddenly all the Rassharou started talking at once.

"What? Are you mad? A Talsh spy ship, all the way out here?" Tado asked. His voice was joined by many of the other anxious Rassharou men and women.

"It's true. Yesterday, three Talsh ships left the deserted island near Rasu, heading northeast and northwest. You must not sail that way. If you encounter them, they'll kill you."

In her mind, she could still see the rain of arrows as they slashed the air around her and hear the horrible sound as they'd pierced the gunwales and the hull. She remembered her uncles' frenzied screaming, Rashi crying—her father's voice, telling her to run—the arrow in his shoulder—

Her whole body shook. Surina crouched down and gripped the side of her ship, hard.

"Hey! Are you all right?"

She heard voices around her, but she couldn't answer. She felt a chill like the beginnings of a fever go through her, then heard a high-pitched noise before passing out.

When she came to, an unfamiliar middle-aged woman was rubbing her back. "Poor dear," she said, "you've had a time of it. But don't be discouraged. You'll be all right." The woman spoke hoarsely, but kept encouraging Surina as she rubbed her all over, trying to warm her up.

When Surina opened her eyes and tried to sit up, the whole world spun, but she recovered after a few moments. She and the woman tending to her were not the only ones on the ship. She saw others gathered around her or stretched out on the deck. Everyone was looking at her with expressions of concern.

Surina repressed the sudden and urgent desire to cry. If she started crying now, she doubted she'd ever stop. She'd fallen into these people's hands as if she were an infant in need of care.

"It must have been awful," the woman helping her said. "You can tell us about it, if you want. It may help. And if you hadn't come to warn us, the same thing could have happened to our ships. But you don't need to be afraid anymore. You can come with us. We live near Kanak island. That's not such a far distance from Kalsh. And the Nan Yalga has said that if we pass nearby the island, we'll stop off and see you home."

The woman's kindness pierced Surina's heart. She looked up at the woman's dark, wrinkled face and thought, *Thank you. Thank you so much.*

But what she said was, "I can't go to Kanak. And I can't go to Kalsh."

The woman blinked at her. "Why not?"

"I have to get to the capital. I have to let them know that the Talsh are planning to attack."

The Rassharou surrounding her appeared confused. They were silent for a few moments.

"Don't be stupid," Tado said, breaking the silence. "Why should a young girl like you have to stick her nose into matters like which country is going to attack who? When the sandworms wander away from our ships, they are gobbled up by what lies below. You intend to do us the same harm that befell your father," Tado said in a reprimanding tone.

"It seems to me you haven't thought things through," Tado continued. "Take some time, think about things calmly, and listen to us. In place of your father, I will share with you our Rassharou wisdom. We have nothing to do with Sangal, or Talsh, or any other nation. We are Rassharou. Who cares who's the king of anywhere? No one rules the waves.

"Wars are like storms. What do you do when a storm comes? That's easy. You sail where there is no storm. We are not Takka Dorura, the island peoples—their petty squabbles do not concern us. We can go anywhere in our ships. We can live anywhere. The ocean is vast. Perhaps the Talsh wish to wage a war upon the waves, but that is not our concern."

This was a very typical Rassharou perspective. Surina's father probably would have said much the same thing. He would probably want her to run away with Tado's fleet, so that she would be safe.

Tado softened his tone a little. "You have given us valuable information. For that, we thank you. Please come with us, as Ala has asked."

Surina looked up at Tado and shook her head slowly.

"I can't. I have a promise to keep. And if I fail to keep it, I'm sure my father will scold me mercilessly." When Surina told Tado about the promise she'd made to Dogol, he frowned.

"This Dogol person is cruel, to coerce you into such a promise. You are not under any obligations to keep your word. I'm sure he never wanted or expected you to succeed. And I'm certain your father wouldn't scold you for saving yourself."

Tado was probably right. But Surina wasn't used to running away from her promises.

"Thank you," she said, "but I have to at least try to make it to the capital."

Tado sighed. "Well, if you insist. We will pray for your safety and success."

Ala stood up and said, "Please. Come with us."

Surina smiled at her, but shook her head. Ala nodded in sad understanding, then led her back to her own ship. She was just about to jump from one ship to the other when she remembered something.

"Miss Ala!" she called out. Ala turned to face her. "Could you sell me some sandworms?"

Ala consulted with a man that seemed to be her husband. After a while, she lifted up a small jar full of sandworms and passed it to Surina. She stubbornly refused to accept any money for it.

"Even a pinch of sandworms will glow well in the dark," Ala said. "I've given you a fair amount, so don't be shy about using them."

Surina thanked her and opened the jar. It was nearly full, but the worms inside were indistinguishable from ordinary sand. If, like last night, Surina found herself unable to sleep, she might try night fishing with the sandworms.

"Be careful as you travel," Ala said. "And if you ever change your mind, you can come back to us on Kanak at any time. All right?"

Surina's chest ached with gratitude. She bowed deeply to Ala, then returned to her ship.

The Rassharou fleet hoisted sail and moved away from her, buffeted by strong winds. A short time later, Surina found herself once more alone, sailing over an ocean bright with sunshine. She quickly lost sight of the Rassharou ships.

She had hardly slept at all the previous night. *But I did have that strange dream...it was like I was asleep, but the boat still moved, underwater.*

A little before noon, Surina dropped anchor in the shallows just off the coast of an uninhabited island. Instead of putting on more sunscreen, she positioned herself in the shade of her sails. As soon as she got comfortable, she fell into a deep sleep.

In a dream, she saw her mother coming closer to her. She seemed to be trying to tell Surina something, over and over again, but her voice was completely drowned out by the sound of rain.

"I can't hear you!" Surina shouted as loudly as she could. Her mother extended a hand, touched one of Surina's ears, and...

She woke up suddenly, disoriented and unsure of where she was for a few seconds. The sound of the rain lashing the sails above her head was violently loud. It sounded like beans being poured steadily along a tightly stretched length of leather.

Surina adjusted her sails and gazed out at the sea. She was astonished at what she saw. Lightning forked in the darkening sky. Surina picked up a bucket full of rainwater on deck and gulped it down. Then she waited, still under her sails, for the thunderclouds to dissipate.

She lifted anchor and considered where to go next. *If I take the Nogura current, I should pass Tonol Island.*

Muttering to herself, Surina prepared the ship to set sail. She needed to take the same route her father had taken from Kalsh in reverse. She couldn't stop at Kalsh this time, but had to turn northwest from there. Wracking her brains and reviewing everything she knew,

Surina mentally mapped the fastest route to Sangal's capital city. Even though she was pressed for time, she felt somehow that time was the only resource she had plenty of. If she failed to plan properly, who knew how many days she could lose.

She decided to indulge in one of the luxuries in her stores and retrieved a baked honey candy from a crate. Its sweetness spread over her tongue as it dissolved in her mouth. Her remaining exhaustion melted away as she ate. Only the lingering traces of her dream still troubled her. The sensation of her mother's hand touching her ear was so vivid that she thought it had been real.

Wind filled her sails. Surina raised her palm to check the wind's direction and felt the wind blowing through her whole body. The ship gradually began to pick up speed as she navigated along the Nogura current.

For a while after that, Surina traveled over the deep clear ocean, so far from land that she couldn't so much as see the outline of any island. It was a long, solitary voyage. Her hair was loose in the wind and salt water stung her senses. She kept expecting to smell the smoke of cooking fires mixed with the aroma of roasting fish, but she was too far from people for that.

I miss the smell of smoke. I'd love to talk to someone, anyone.

Feeling indescribably lonely, Surina brought her knees to her chest and clasped her hands together as she cried, half-heartedly manning her sails as she wept.

She didn't know how much time passed before she heard something ahead of her, carried on the wind. She cleared out her ears to listen better. The commingled sounds reminded her of music and dancing at a festival. Surina glanced over the side of her ship and looked down.

She gasped. On the ocean floor, she saw a flower garden that spread out in all directions. The usual dull gray sea had transformed into the bright blue lapis lazuli-colored water that she remembered from her dream. A pale peach light hovered over the entire undersea garden,

caused by the deep blue light reflected by seaweed being cast upon the pink flowers below.

Singing voices echoed from among the flowers. Here and there, the petals of the flowers shook slightly as if they were being tickled. Sometimes, a golden powder like pollen escaped from the flowers and danced in the sea. Surina watched this powder swirl up all the way above the surface of the waves, rising into the sky.

She heard a sound like a flock of chirping birds. While the golden powder danced above her, a school of small fish plunged upward out of the sea to consume the powder, gulping it down as if it was their favorite food. When she realized that the strange chirping came from the fish, she was amazed.

The fish were not the only ones making noise. The floating seaweed, the pale pink flowers, and everything else in the bright blue water joined their voices to the same song.

When she realized this, Surina blinked. She opened her eyes and was suddenly completely covered in the bright blue waves, just as she had been the previous night. When she passed under the layer of seaweed above, she saw innumerable points of bright light dancing on the ocean floor. The lights moved smoothly through the water, leaving bright trails behind them. They approached her, but seemed to shy away when they got too close. As she tried to track the light that played gently over her cheeks, Surina noticed that each light greatly resembled the eye of a fish when seen up close.

Underwater plants rippled in the waves like locks of shining hair. Unblinking eyes looked at Surina as if they were staring right through her.

People that look like fish eyes? They weren't people, but they seemed to possess a mind and a will just like she did.

As the lights danced around her, their song grew louder. Surina's own body began to sway. Her loneliness vanished like a popped bubble. Surina matched her own movements to the song and started humming; it felt like her soul was full of bubbles. The song made her feel warm and safe.

As she danced, she caught sight of another girl on the sea floor, her face visible in the gap between the pale pink petals of the flowers. She was dancing closer, almost close enough to touch.

Eshana.

As Surina watched Eshana dancing and singing happily beneath her, her blood went cold.

"Eshana!" Surina called out to her without thinking. "Eshana! Eshana!"

Surina's voice became a stream of white bubbles that traveled through the bright blue waves to tickle Eshana's face. Eshana lifted her head, appearing puzzled, and looked at Surina.

Surina saw the faint light of recognition in Eshana's eyes, but as Surina reached out to her, that light faded. Eshana's soul had been lured beneath the sea by this song; the sea would not let her go easily.

Surina continued calling Eshana's name in desperation. Surina suddenly remembered, with perfect clarity, having heard this exact song before. She'd been about six years old, sailing with her family at night. She'd heard the song faintly beneath her, from under the waves.

At that time, her mother's warm hands had completely covered her ears. "Do you hear that? You mustn't listen to it. It's the song of the Nayugul Raita, luring you under the sea. If you accept their invitation, you'll lose your soul and remain under the sea forever."

When this memory resurfaced, Surina's ability to see the real world, in addition to the bright blue world she associated with dreams, returned to her. The dark waters of her world's ocean overlapped with those of the Other Sea. She could see her ship floating above her.

Surina grasped the side of her ship. With a gut-wrenching cry, she yelled: "Eshana! It's Surina! Remember? Your mother is waiting for you. Come back!"

The ship slowly drifted away from the undersea garden where Eshana's soul danced. Eshana lifted her head and frowned. Surina shouted loudly, trying to drown out the song of the Nayugul Raita.

"Eshana! Eshana! Come over here, with me! If you stay here, you'll die!"

The light of recognition slowly returned to Eshana's eyes. She looked directly at Surina. Her mouth formed slow syllables. "Su...ri...na?"

Suddenly, a white light emerged from Eshana's forehead, condensing and forming into a long white thread. Neither Surina nor Eshana knew this, but this white light was Eshana's soul thread, which was connected to her body.

Eshana pulled at the white thread and kicked at the bright blue water beneath her feet. Eshana rose up over the bright blue waves, up and up and up.

Chapter 2 - The Dreaded Spear

At breakfast on the morning of the fourth day of the coronation celebration ceremonies, the guests of state were treated to a feast for the eyes. Priceless treasures were gathered in a huge hall. Guests ate and talked along the sides of this hall while the King of Sangal and Crown Prince Karnan explained each treasure's history and origin, as well as the history of the royal family.

Though it was well before noon, it was cloyingly hot. There were few windows in the treasure hall. The servers that had brought in the food stood near it and started waving huge fans to circulate the air, but this did not help much.

The Sangal royal family's treasures proved fascinating enough for the guests to tolerate the heat. Many of them had been gained through trade from faraway or ancient empires. Guests spoke in reverent tones as they gazed at the treasures. Radiant gemstones drew many eyes, though not so many as the enormous collection of spears and harpoons lined up along one wall. Some of the spears were lavishly decorated with jewels, while still others were unadorned. All of them were as sharp as thorns.

"You may believe these spears are too warlike and crude to be considered priceless treasures," the King of Sangal said, "but these weapons tell the history of this nation, as well as of our family. It is likely that all of you already know this, but our royal ancestors were pirates."

The King of Sangal smiled warmly. His smile was infectious: many of his guests smiled back at him. Chagum also grinned while glancing at Prince Tarsan, who sat in a chair near his father. But Tarsan did not smile. Something seemed to be troubling him; his eyebrows drew together in a frown.

Chagum was concerned at seeing Tarsan so much changed from the previous night. Another thing that troubled him was the girl standing

close to the middle of the hall, unmoving, with her eyes completely covered. Even though he couldn't see her full face or her eyes at all, he had the strongest feeling that she could see, somehow. He hadn't noticed that the previous night because he'd been so distracted by the scent of the water spirit of Nayugu, but he felt fairly certain she'd been able to see then as well. The more he thought about it, the more worried he became.

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Tarsan was in a foul mood. It was hot and the voices of his father and brother buzzed like irritating insects in his ear. He wished this dumb ceremony would end already so that he could go swimming. Why did his father insist on explaining everything so exhaustively?

Please, please, please stop talking...

He'd heard a low buzz like the droning of bees ever since he'd woken up that morning. Tarsan felt that he was rapidly approaching the limits of his tolerance for decorum. If he couldn't leave soon, he'd explode.

One of the guests of state pointed to something at the far end of the treasure hall. "Have all these spears been used in war?" she asked. "What about that enormous one there?"

The other guests turned their attention to the spear indicated and let out exclamations of awe. The spear was made of plain iron, unadorned, but it was as tall as most grown men and its shaft was as thick around as a child's arm.

"Yes, yes, of course," the King of Sangal said, still smiling. "That spear belonged to our illustrious ancestor, Prince Sadal. It was nicknamed the 'Dreaded Spear,' as it was very much to be feared. One successful throw of the spear could pierce a warship's hull and sink it."

Many of the guests nodded politely at this story. The King, as if sensing their doubt as to the spear's effectiveness, laughed and went on, "Do you believe it? Maybe it does seem impossible. No ordinary man

can so much as lift this spear. Men that can hoist it to shoulder level and throw it any distance are even rarer. The only man here that could even make the attempt is..." He paused, looking around. "Prince Tarsan."

Tarsan lifted his head.

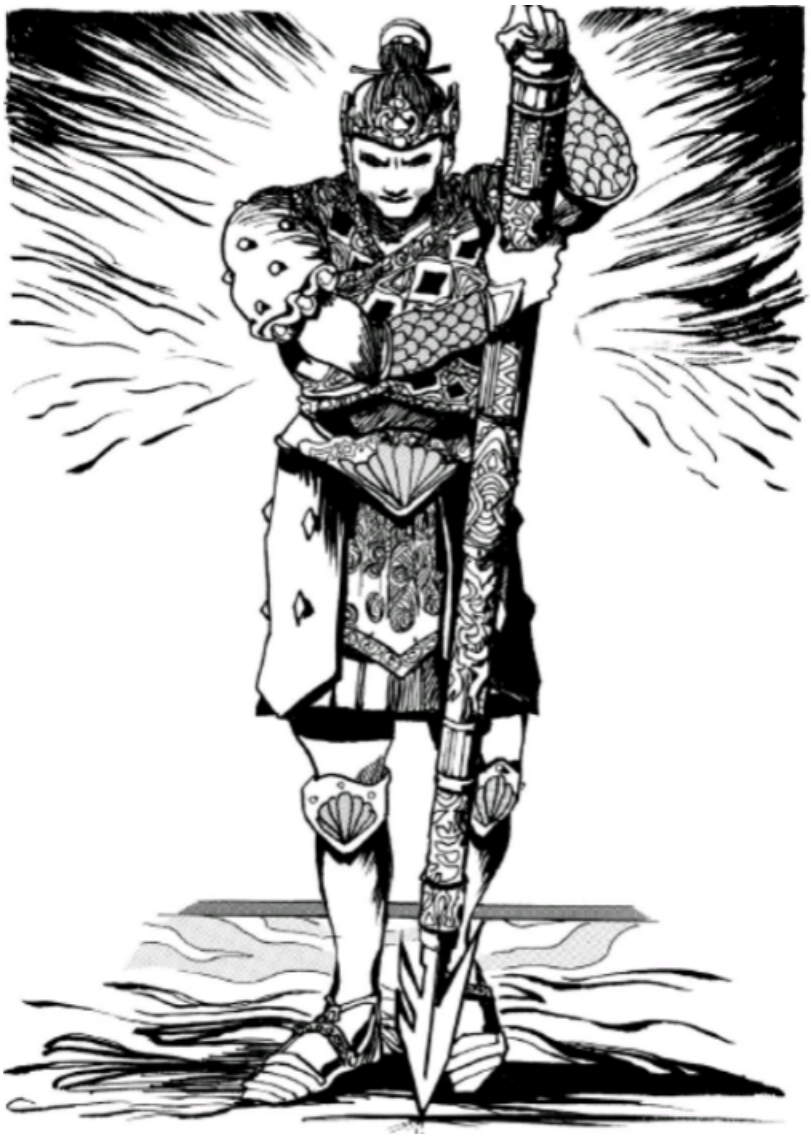
"Everyone," the King said, "behold how the men of Sangal wield their spears!"

The guests spoke apprehensively among themselves. No matter how strong he was, Prince Tarsan was still only a boy of fourteen. It didn't seem like he'd truly be able to lift such a massively heavy spear.

Are they making fun of me? Tarsan thought. *Do they think I can't do it?*

Tarsan left his seat. Without bowing, he faced the spear and started walking toward it. Chagum's face clouded over as he watched Tarsan move. Tarsan's expression was entirely flat and lifeless, but Chagum sensed an incredible anger burning within him. Saluna noticed him seething as well and wondered what had caused it as well as what could be done about it.

But as Tarsan stalked down the hall, neither Chagum nor Saluna could identify anything precisely *wrong* with Tarsan. They were concerned at seeing his discomfort and unease, but neither of them could guess the cause.



Tarsan reached out and gripped the two-handed spear casually, using only one hand at first. It was heavier than he'd anticipated: heavy enough to interfere with his balance. He nearly toppled over, but then he braced the spear with both hands and used his whole body to remain upright.

At that moment, scornful laughter echoed through the hall, but only Tarsan heard it. In truth, no one had laughed. Tarsan could hear his brother's laugh bouncing off the walls of his mind.

Tarsan blushed bright red in embarrassment. All of his seething rage boiled over at once. His vision went white with the force of his anger.

Tarsan lifted the Dreaded Spear and adjusted his grip, holding it firmly so that he could lift it to his shoulder. He turned around, summoned all his strength—and hurled the Dreaded Spear directly at his brother Karnan.

The room dissolved into chaos as everyone struggled to make sense of what was happening. The heavy spear slashed through the air with a sound like roaring wind, its point finally tearing into Karnan's shoulder and embedding itself in the wall behind him.

Karnan's blood splattered all over the King of Sangal. The remaining guests stared at the unconscious Karnan in horror as if they'd been frozen to the spot.

The next moment, anxious murmurs filled the hall like the buzzing of a hive of agitated bees. Tarsan laid sprawled out on the floor, still and unmoving as if time had stopped. One hand clutched his injured shoulder.

In the exact center of the room, the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita stood absolutely motionless.

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"How is Prince Karnan?" Chagum asked Saluna when she greeted him at lunch. She appeared calm, but he could sense what her composure must be costing her.

"I'm so sorry this happened... It's kind of you to be so concerned. Thankfully, his life does not appear to be in danger, but no one can tell for sure yet." Saluna bit her lip.

"I am sure the King has many excellent physicians," Chagum said, "but if you deem it appropriate, I know Shuga would like to help, if possible. Star Readers receive excellent medical training."

Saluna looked over at Shuga, who was sitting next to Chagum. He did seem like a smart and capable young man, so Saluna bowed to Chagum and said, "Thank you. After we finish lunch, I'll lead you to—"

Saluna's words were cut off by the sound of a shaguram flute. Everyone turned toward the sound and saw the King of Sangal standing

in the entrance to the dining hall. Conversations ceased as all eyes fell on the King.

The King of Sangal bowed deeply. "Honored guests. First, I must apologize to each and every one of you. Even though you've come all this way at our invitation, we have allowed this terrible situation to occur. I beg your forgiveness." The King's voice was usually redolent with echoes of laughter, but there was no joy in his tone now, only measured calm. "Fortunately, the Crown Prince's injuries do not seem to threaten his life, nor should he lose the use of his arm."

Some of the guests expressed their relief aloud. The King bowed before the assembled guests once again. "I thank you so much for your kindness! I would like to give you all a full explanation, but it was never even considered possible that such a tragic event could occur during our coronation festivities."

If the new King was not crowned—that is, if Karnan's state of health worsened—the King of Sangal would lose an entire generation of male heirs. Regardless of what happened with Karnan, Tarsan would be tried for attempted bratricide and possibly executed. The King was dancing on the knife edge of despair, though he showed none of his anguish on his face. He doled out apologies as if they were the most precious gifts he owned, but no number of apologies could help either one of his sons now.

The King then told his guests that they were free to stay for as long as they chose, but that all remaining coronation ceremonies were currently canceled. It didn't make sense for foreign Kings and dignitaries to linger too long when there was no diplomatic need to do so.

However, many of the guests could think of at least one reason to stay. Until the situation with the royal family resolved itself, Sangal's place as a nation was unstable. They were better off staying until the situation was resolved rather than returning home and relying on unreliable or incomplete rumors of the end result later.

The guests exchanged their opinions of the King's policy in hushed tones. It became the main topic of conversation over lunch.

"Where is Prince Tarsan now?" Chagum asked Saluna in a whisper.

"I can't say for sure, but they've probably moved him to the stone dungeons," Saluna whispered back.

"I can't believe it," Chagum said, with maybe a little too much conviction. His voice was too loud for the hall. "I know Prince Tarsan has a temper," he said more quietly, "but to do something like that would have required some kind of premeditation. A hint. A plan. Anything. I didn't sense anything like that from him at all."

Saluna looked at Chagum. Her cheeks were faintly tinged pink. Every line of her face expressed gratitude. "You believe in him, too," she said softly. "Thank you. So do I."

She glanced around, trying to determine if anyone was listening to them. "He did try to work some violence toward you, Prince Chagum. I know it, and I know he is quick to anger, and he can be prompted to idiocy like a frustrated child at times, but *never*, not in a million years would he ever lift a spear against his brother." Saluna spoke rapidly, the words gushing forth as if some dam within her had burst.

"And that isn't the only strange thing I noticed," Saluna said. "From the moment he entered that hall, I knew he was in a terrible mood."

"I noticed that, too," Chagum said. "He was acting completely differently than he did last night. I thought there was something seriously wrong."

Saluna's eyes shone. "Really? I may have dismissed my own feelings if I were the only one that noticed, but..." The hopeful light in her eyes flickered and went out. "But even if he had some kind of reason, that still doesn't change the fact that he attacked Karnan unprovoked."

When she thought about the fate awaiting Tarsan now, Saluna burst into tears. She knew it was inappropriate to display such improper behavior before guests of state, but she also couldn't compose herself any longer.

Chagum reached out his hand, but he stopped himself before he could touch her. He wanted to offer her comfort, but that, too, would be a breach of decorum before the assembled guests.

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Prince Karnan's medical treatment continued until well into the wee hours of the night. The Dreaded Spear had grazed the bone of his left shoulder and pierced deeply into his flesh. He remained unconscious, undoubtedly from shock and the terrible pain of the wound. However, the spear had not punctured any major arteries or blood vessels; this was likely the reason that Karnan's life had been spared.

Shuga, at his own request and backed by Chagum's orders, accompanied Saluna to Prince Karnan's bedside, where he remained for the next several hours. He helped as much as he could with Prince Karnan’s treatment. Sangal's physicians were capable and knowledgeable; Shuga learned so much from them that the time passed in the blink of an eye. However, the physicians lacked a knowledge of many medicines that were common in New Yogo. He offered the physicians one of these medicines, a common painkiller. They were stunned at how quickly it worked to bring down inflammation and at how effective it seemed to be.

In each of the four corners of the room, a priestess of the mother of the sea stood chanting prayers continuously as Shuga and the other physicians worked. When Prince Karnan's strength seemed to be fading like the ebbing of a tide, their prayers grew louder and more urgent, as if they were begging for his soul not to be pulled into the sea.

At long last, Karnan's condition stabilized. By this time, it was well past midnight. Shuga offered his thanks and sincere admiration to the other physicians, then left the room to return to the chambers set aside for him and Chagum.

A servant was leading Shuga down a corridor back to the palace's guest quarters when he heard a strangled cry. The servant in front of him trembled in fear.

"What's that?" Shuga asked in Sangalese.

The servant looked up at him and frowned. "It is coming from the room where Prince Tarsan is being treated for his injuries."

"Ah! I suppose that lifting and throwing a spear that heavy would injure his shoulder. It may be a good idea to give him something to help with the pain. No matter how grievous his crime, it seems a shame to let him suffer."

Shuga had no interest in involving himself further in the Sangal royal family's problems, but he knew that Chagum was worried about Prince Tarsan. Still, that seemed to provide even more of a reason not to get involved. Chagum would gain nothing from a connection with a prince that had tried to kill his own brother.

Shuga approached the entrance to the room where Tarsan's injuries were being treated. The door slammed open and a single soldier ran down the hall away from him. Shuga peered into the room through the open door and stopped in his tracks.

Four soldiers squatted down on Tarsan's body, each one pinning a limb. Their attempts at restraining him were not very successful; Tarsan thrashed like a madman beneath them, dislodging one and then another as they struggled to hold him down. The soldier Shuga had seen in the hall had probably run to get help.

Tarsan looked like a demon in a rage. His right shoulder was bandaged, but Tarsan showed no sign of favoring it. He did not appear to be in any pain at all. If he managed to shake any one of the soldiers completely off, it was likely that the others would not be able to maintain their hold on him.

If Shuga chose to leave now, he didn't know what he'd do next. Call for help himself?

But of course Shuga couldn't leave now. He also couldn't just stand by and watch all this happen. He had learned a bit of magic weaving

from Torogai that would render anyone that had been magically induced to violence unconscious for a time. He decided to try it, summoning his concentration and gathering energy in his right hand as he spoke the words of the spell in a voice not much louder than a whisper. He approached the soldiers, assuming a low stance as if he meant to help them pin Tarsan, then set his right hand casually on Tarsan's forehead. He tried to make the movement look accidental, coincidental, like he was pausing there before holding down Tarsan's shoulders.

The instant Shuga touched him, Tarsan collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. Searing pain throbbed in Shuga's right hand. He jumped back from Tarsan reflexively, his hand hurting so much that his vision went white for a few seconds. As he withdrew, he smelled something burning—a terrible something that almost made him gag.

Shuga summoned the presence of mind to complete his spell in order to protect his mind and soul from the source of that pain and the awful odor that came with it.

It smells like dolga root when it's been burned.

Shuga looked at Tarsan with an expression of horror. Dolga root was only ever used for one thing. Torogai had told him that dolga root's only utility was in manipulating people's souls.

There were some magic weavers in the world with black hearts that would curse or even kill people for money. The curse that required dolga root was only used by magic weavers such as these. People afflicted by the curse would become the magic weaver's puppet, compelled to do whatever the magic weaver desired of them while losing all sense of themselves. If the curse remained active too long, the victim would go mad and attack everything around them like a wild beast.

Prince Tarsan had undoubtedly been cursed by someone. Shuga felt goosebumps rise along the line of his spine. Up until yesterday, Prince Tarsan had seemed completely normal. When and how had he been cursed?

The soldiers in the room wiped the sweat from their brows and looked down at Prince Tarsan. Their expressions conveyed their confusion at what had just occurred more eloquently than any words. Shuga offered them a hopeless shrug, as if he didn't understand anything, either.

"He must have exhausted himself and passed out. Let's get him into bed," Shuga said in Sangalese. The soldier that had run for help would probably return soon, with more soldiers. Until they returned, Shuga could still act, but he was unsure of what he should do. Even if Prince Tarsan had been cursed, it was best for him to stay out of any affairs or plots affecting Sangal's royal family. He now wished that he'd retreated when he'd first seen Tarsan and the soldiers.

However, he was intrigued by the idea that someone had cast a curse on Tarsan that required dolga root. He remembered something Torogai had told him when she'd first taught him about such curses: "This spell was not dreamed up by Yakoo magic weavers. It came from you Yogo people, when you crossed the sea and came here. It originated on Nayoro peninsula to the far south and spread from there. That's what I've heard."

Shuga had laughed. "Impossible! The Yogo people don't know how to curse anyone. The only magic the Yogo people brought with them to this country is Tendo, which I've studied extensively. Tendo teaches no curses. Perhaps you are mistaken, Master Torogai."

Torogai had fixed him with a serious expression. "No. Your people may have forgotten it, since you came here so long ago and from so far away—but when you came across the sea, you brought your magic weavers with you. Their magic and Yakoo magic developed together after that, each taking bits from the other, but Yogo magic weaving has faded into the background, these days."

Based on what he'd seen with Tarsan, it seemed to Shuga that Sangal magic weavers might also know how to cast a curse using dolga root. If this specific curse had originally come from Yogo, who on earth could have cast it? They were in the royal palace; there were watchful

eyes and potential witnesses everywhere due to the coronation ceremonies. Who could have managed it?

As Shuga approached Tarsan's bed, he had a terrible premonition, as if a poisonous snake was about to slither out from beneath it. It was clear that whatever this magic weaver's plot was, the plot's target was the Sangal royal family. But knowing that didn't make Shuga worry any less. If there was someone in the palace that could manipulate anyone to their will at any time, then no one was safe. It was possible that Tarsan could still be manipulated by this magic weaver.

He had to get to the bottom of this. But if the Sangal royal family found out about his involvement with Tarsan here, it could lead to some serious misunderstandings.

Shuga crossed the remaining distance to Tarsan's bedside and pretended to check his condition. The magic weaver that had cursed Tarsan would have left traces of their own tampering in his body. Focusing on what Torogai had taught him, Shuga searched Tarsan for the root cause of the curse.

This curse caused the victim to obey the caster. How were they connected? He had to find the connection before the soldiers in the room grew suspicious. Shuga moved his hands from Tarsan's sweaty forehead to his shoulders and chest rapidly. As his hands passed over Tarsan's stomach, the smell of dolga root became overpowering.

Shuga's eyes snapped wide open. The cause of the curse was contained inside a ring wrapped precariously around the first knuckle of Tarsan's little finger. It was so small that it was difficult to see at first glance.

That's it. That's the connection.

Shuga heard the sounds of many footsteps approaching behind him and turned around. The soldier he'd seen in the hall before was some twenty feet away, leading several others.

In the brief amount of time he had left before they entered the room, Shuga whispered a spell and slipped the ring off of Tarsan's finger. When he touched the ring, he felt someone's eyes on him and

blinked out an afterimage of someone staring at him in the dark. Before he could identify who was watching him, their presence disappeared entirely. All the magical energy suffused within the ring dissipated as well.

The person that cast this curse was watching me this whole time.

He felt like the magic weaver's eyes were still on him. His shoulders shook. That magic weaver was capable of cursing others and leading them to cruel and painful deaths—and they had seen absolutely everything. They knew who he was.

Shuga felt himself balk at his own inadequacy. He had learned the basics of magic weaving from Torogai, but he felt like a chick just hatched from a mother hen. There was so much more for him to learn. Whoever had cast the curse on Prince Tarsan was on another level than him entirely. Shuga did not believe that he was strong enough to oppose them.

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The door to Chagum's side chamber opened with a muffled sound. Chagum opened his eyes. It was still some time before dawn; the room was pitch black. When he heard Shuga's footsteps in the next room, he crawled out from under his blanket and sat up.

"I'm sorry," Shuga said from the doorway. "Did I wake you?"

"It's fine," Chagum said. "I wasn't sleeping well, anyway. Could you light one of the lamps for me?"

Shuga lit one of the salu shell lamps in the room. Chagum watched his face appear above him in the dark, illumined in a dim corona of candlelight. Shuga appeared as calm as ever, but Chagum could tell that he was doing his best to conceal his exhaustion.

"Prince Karnan's condition is stable," Shuga said. "As long as the situation doesn't take a drastic turn for the worse, I do not believe that his life is in danger."

"Really? Thanks for telling me, Shuga. It must have been awful to see. I'd like to hear a full report in the morning, but right now I think you should get some sleep."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Shuga bowed, but did not leave the room.

Chagum identified genuine worry in Shuga's exhausted eyes. He frowned. "Did something happen, Shuga?"

Shuga stared at Chagum for a few moments, then blinked. "Your Majesty. Prince Tarsan was cursed."

"What? Cursed?"

Shuga arranged his thoughts and told Chagum what he knew about Tarsan's curse, including what he knew of its root cause and the magic weaver that had cast it. Chagum's eyes remained fixed on Shuga as he spoke.

When Chagum finished listening, he got out of bed and stood up. When he began removing his own sleeping clothes without calling any attendants, Shuga's jaw slackened in shock.

"Your Majesty, what on earth are you doing?"

"I'm doing what I have to do. I understand worrying about curses. Of course I do. And I know you always consider my safety first, and I'm grateful for that." Chagum looked at Shuga with shining eyes. "But both of Sangal's princes have been targeted. I can't keep quiet about this."

"But...dolga root is—"

"I've already considered that," Chagum interrupted irritably. "We don't know if only Yogo magic weavers use dolga root, or if Sangal magic weavers do, too. That makes it harder for us to figure out who's behind this. But I don't want to sit here thinking about it—I want to *do* something."

"You're planning to tell the King of Sangal about all this?"

"Yes. I know you're against it. But there's a chance that the magic weaver is from Yogo. That might help narrow the suspects down. Even if it doesn't, forewarned is forearmed. The most important thing now is

to find out the truth. Right? How did Tarsan get cursed? If we don't find out, now, we might not uncover the purpose or the scope of the plot until it's too late. We are being tracked by a venomous snake in the dead of night. Who knows who it will bite next?"

Chagum spoke rapidly without pausing for breath. Shuga put up a hand to restrain the unrestricted flow of words. "Your Majesty. I understand. We are indeed being tracked in the dead of night. We do not know who the magic weaver's next victim will be. Everything about this situation is shrouded in darkness.

"But we also have no evidence to present to anyone that might doubt us. I believe this ring originally contained the curse upon Tarsan, but now..." Shuga trailed off as he showed Chagum the ring he'd taken from Tarsan's hand. "It's just an ordinary ring. All anyone can say for sure right now is that a lot of people saw Prince Tarsan throw a spear at Crown Prince Karnan with deliberate intent to injure or even kill him. There is no evidence to suggest that this is not the case."

Shuga looked at Chagum and said quietly, "The current situation of the Sangal royal family is untenable. Something must change. Something *will* change, undoubtedly for the worse. We may be better off thinking along the same lines as the magic weaver to discover the truth—the only ones that would benefit from a prince killing another prince would be traitors of some kind. If we do uncover a traitorous plot, it may be possible to exonerate Prince Tarsan.

"However," Shuga said, "even if you tell the King of Sangal about the curse, he may not be motivated to seek out the truth."

Chagum frowned. "Why?"

"Consider our own nation. The royal family is always expected to be dignified and free of any corruption, illness, or any hint of scandal. The royal family of Sangal is much the same. If you did tell the King of Sangal about Tarsan's curse, at best you would be telling him to search for a criminal without giving him any clues as to who they are or where they might be. At worst, the King may consider your knowledge suspicious. The King is desperate. We may be seen as a convenient answer to his

prayers and be sacrificed as traitors in order to protect his own reputation."

Chagum's face scrunched up as if he'd just smelled something incredibly unpleasant. He turned away from Shuga and faced the flame that was lit inside the salu seashell lamp. Slowly, very slowly, he returned his gaze to Shuga.

"I understand," Chagum said. "I won't tell the King anything. For now."

Shuga's entire body relaxed in relief, but a moment later he straightened up again. Chagum came closer to him until they were nearly close enough to touch, then fixed Shuga with a flensing stare. "Shuga. I want you to promise me one thing. If you find out anything more about this plot—anything at all—I want you to promise you'll tell me. Even if you think, or know, that it would put me in danger, don't conceal anything about it from me. Even if you think I'd be killed for knowing." The light in Chagum's eyes was like the white reflection along the sharp edge of a short sword. "Promise me."

Rulers and politicians could use even sympathy and compassion as weapons. Shuga considered that only natural. Shuga understood that Chagum wanted him to set aside his exalted image in order to protect him—Chagum, the person. Not his reputation. More than that, this was a request to protect Chagum even if doing so irreparably damaged his reputation by tainting him with scandal.

"I promise, Your Majesty," Shuga said. He hoped he wouldn't regret it.

Chapter 3 - Manipulator, Manipulated

A man squatting down in a dim cave stirred his legs to movement. His body had been wrapped in cloth to retain heat better. He poked his head tentatively out of the wrapping and looked around.

This man had been sent to greet Adol, the Island Guardian, when he had first arrived at the palace. His name was Yatonoi Rasugu. He was disguised as a merchant, but in truth he was spy from the war-torn Talsh empire. Talsh's voracious appetite for conquest now targeted the continent to the north. Sangal was in the way.

Rasugu had been sent to make contact with the Island Guardians of Sangal about two years ago. It had taken time to build up trust, but both Rasugu and his new trading partners had both turned a tidy profit in that time. It had been especially difficult to conceal the Island Guardians' new trading activities from the eyes of their wives—but the plot was laid now. All he had to do was wait. Time would bring it to fruition.

Rasugu had said to the Island Guardians, "Sangal is currently only able to expand its influence and wealth by relying on its northern alliances. But the Talsh empire to the south is rich beyond imagining. If Sangal were to open more trade routes with them, Sangal could continue to rely on its current backers while generating more wealth in an almost entirely new market." Such arguments had proved persuasive—to some of them, at least.

Of course, this was all rhetoric. Sangal was already glutted with goods from the markets in the south. There was nothing weak or lacking in their trade network. They also had a fearsome army and a larger navy than the Talsh empire. But if the Talsh empire could break Sangal's alliances with the countries to the north—or, better, if they could get these nations to fight one another—the Talsh conquest could be carried out that much more easily.

Until recently, there had been a reasonable balance of power between the north and the south, but that balance had recently collapsed entirely. The Talsh gathered armies from their explosively growing population and swallowed up every nation bordering their empire like the wave of a tsunami. The islands to the far south of the Sangal kingdom had been the easiest to target; they were far from the capital and the King. But the Talsh had not come there to wage war, but to maintain peace—at least, that's what Rasugu had claimed to all of his new friends in Sangal.

The Talsh were hoping to conquer Sangal without exercising their military might. When they'd first cast their eyes toward the northern continent, the Talsh had quickly grasped that the Yaltash ocean provided easy access to many other nations by means of established trade routes. If they managed to capture Sangal's most strategically located islands, their path to the north would be secure.

The Sangal royal family remained a formidable barrier, but they were not present everywhere. Rasugu had gained allies from several of Sangal's islands in the hope that the Talsh could build bridges instead of inciting enemies. The most convenient outcome for the Talsh was to gain dominion over all of Sangal's islands while leaving their infrastructure mostly intact. The path to the north from Sangal's capital city was straight and clear, and the Talsh wanted it.

As a last resort, the Talsh empire could of course muster its armies on the southern continent and conquer Sangal and the northern continent by force, exerting its power over these weaker nations from afar. But this was less desirable.

From the Talsh point of view, High General Yunan's death from an illness was fortuitous. He had been hugely popular, not just among the King's army, but among the soldiers that served Sangal's Island Guardians as well. He had managed to unite the flimsy ties of loyalty between the islands into one strong bond. In many ways, he'd been the linchpin of the country's defense. After his death, the strong military alliances that existed between islands began to weaken.

With Yunan out of the way, the Talsh began forming relationships with Sangal's Island Guardians while quietly encouraging resistance against Sangal's King. This was a tactic that they often used when invading foreign nations. More often than not, the internal dissension that the Talsh managed to create was capable of making the country destroy itself from within.

Rasugu had been dispatched almost immediately after Yunan had died. He'd ingratiated himself to the Island Guardians and searched out the strongest leaders among them to win to the Talsh cause. But after only a short time of observation, Rasugu had realized that the usual Talsh tactics would not be effective against Sangal. Each Island Guardian was personally independent and not easily led. They also held little trust for one another and seemed to have few grievances against the King that ruled them. Their main interest was in gaining wealth through trade; as long as their preferred activities were not interfered with, they didn't much care who ruled Sangal.

Of all the Island Guardians, only Adol of Kalsh had been relatively easy to convince. He had an independent spirit, but the other Island Guardians would never follow his lead. Even the soldiers that served him had little confidence in him, choosing to place their allegiance and trust in Prince Tarsan, who was not much more than a boy. Rasugu was well attuned to this fact. It seemed that Tarsan greatly resembled the deceased High General Yunan. He'd had to personally do very little to achieve widespread support among Sangal's army.

And there was also Princess Karina to consider—she was Adol's wife and the oldest daughter of the King. She was a remarkable woman, more remarkable than her husband in several respects. There had always been a risk that she would discover Adol's plotting. If that had happened, Rasugu would have been forced to give up all his plans as hopeless. But Karina hadn’t discovered anything, and Rasugu had managed to turn his most significant vulnerability into an advantage.

The Eyes of the Nayugul Raita is a gift from the heavens.

A girl whose soul had flown elsewhere, leaving behind an empty vessel ready to be used: she was perfect. He could control her body freely and she would soon be cast to her death into the sea, leaving behind no evidence of his tampering or any evidence of ties to the Talsh empire.

Rasugu closed his eyes and smiled to himself. Everything was going according to plan. It was a bit unfortunate that the Dreaded Spear had veered slightly from his intended course, but the wound it had inflicted was grave. What would happen next was anyone's guess. Rasugu intended to seize this chance to take down the entire royal family with one stroke.

At the same time he'd decided to use the appearance of the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita to his advantage, he'd sent a message by carrier pigeon to the Talsh army. He'd instructed them to attack the island nation of Sagan that rested along Sangal's southern border. Spy ships were still searching for a secret, direct route to the capital, but aside from these forces, every other Talsh soldier was mobilizing for a war against Sangal.

With Crown Prince Karnan dead and Prince Tarsan condemned to death, Rasugu could encourage the Island Guardians to revolt. He had not won all of them to the Talsh cause, but with the royal family dead Sangal's chain of command would be utterly broken. Sangal would become a series of unconnected island chains with no one to coordinate them all.

Well before preparing for war, the Talsh empire had taken full advantage of Sangal's clever merchants and extensive trade routes. They had learned that the Sangal people were indeed clever merchants, on the whole. When they realized their own disadvantage, they would almost certainly submit to Talsh rule.

It's a shame that the King has only two sons. Imagine the chaos we could create with more.

Rasugu thought about his vanished homeland of Yogo. It had been an ancient kingdom, but the Talsh had sown discord among the

members of its royal family. Yogo had destroyed itself; the Talsh had rushed in to pick up the pieces.

How ironic that I, who gave up and fled my homeland so long ago, should be involved in such a similar plot to destroy another nation. Hm... Perhaps I still feel something for my homeland after all.

He remembered the face of the young man that had disrupted his work with Prince Tarsan and grumbled to himself. That man's features were undoubtedly Yogoese, mixed with other characteristics that were more shapely and dignified. Over its long history, the people of Yogo had mixed their bloodlines with those of other nations; that young man seemed to be such a mix. He definitely didn't think that the young man had come from Yogo.

That Crown Prince, though, is the spitting image of the old royal family. When he remembered that Chagum had slipped out of the snare of his magic weaving, Rasugu became faintly nauseated. *The royal family of Yogo are stubborn stock, it seems. Even after all this time...*

Crown Prince Chagum was entirely enclosed, living in a protective cocoon like some kind of pale blue insect. Rasugu shook himself. In the end, Chagum was just the descendant of a family that had destroyed its own nation to fuel its greed.

Magic weavers were scorned in Yogo. They were paid to curse people, or harm or injure them in other ways. The Yogo people were highly conscious of their own individual purity and wary of anything that might put them at risk of contamination. The purest of all the Yogo people was the Mikado, their ruler. Expectations of high personal purity extended to his family and acquaintances as well. It was widely believed that any commoner that gazed upon the Mikado or his family would be struck blind.

Magic weavers were considered utterly contaminated and impure. They only reason they hadn’t been eradicated was that they were so powerful: they were known for cursing people, but they also possessed the kind of power that could restore the souls of the dying. Most people in Yogo feared and detested magic weavers. Some turned from the

healing profession to take up magic weaving in order to gain greater knowledge and ended up corrupted by power. The more contaminated magic weavers were in their world's eyes, the more power they seemed to possess. In this way they transcended the status proscribed to them.

The imperial family of the Mikado and the Star Readers were the prime examples of the power of purity in Yogo. But no matter how many people a magic weaver saved, they had no hope of reaching such an exalted status, ever. They were consigned to the shadows, considered impure and unclean by all.

The Talsh way of thinking about magic weavers was entirely different. As far as magic was concerned, the Talsh only cared if it was useful or not—and if it was deemed useful, they would use it, to the very limits of its capabilities. Utility was perhaps the only thing the Talsh empire truly cared about. After Rasugu's home nation had fallen to the Talsh, they'd shown off their ruthlessly utilitarian attitude at every opportunity.

The conviction that everything the Talsh empire did was useful did much to fuel their desire for expansion. As many people as possible should bear witness to their competence—and contribute their own useful talents for the glory of the empire. The Talsh cared little for the personal loyalty of the people they subjugated; their primary aim was always to display their own power and greatness.

Yogo society had functioned by separating the pure from the contaminated. Talsh society functioned by spreading and upholding its monolithic reputation of invincibility.

Rasugu envisioned a map of Sangal in his mind. Soon, the places on the map would run red with blood. Like pawns in a game, each fallen player would lead to yet more blood drawn, until the winner of the game was declared. The chaos that the Talsh created before attacking any nation practically guaranteed that their invasion would succeed.

However, Rasugu had not foreseen that anyone would be able to see through his magic weaving. It was an unfortunate failing on his part, not to have foreseen it. Still, the plan would not fail because of it. And he

could still use the body of the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita freely enough as his tool.

Rasugu had no doubts at all about the effectiveness of his plan. The man that had seen through his curse clearly possessed some knowledge of magic, but he had not possessed the knowledge to turn the curse back on the caster or to discover the curse's source. Rasugu had no need to treat an amateur as an enemy.

Rasugu spent nearly all his time occupying the body of the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita, returning to his body only often enough to eat and drink and ensure his own flesh would not perish. He needed to watch over events to ensure that all his plans achieved the desired results. His remaining inside the girl's body also ensured that no other souls could take control of it—including the girl's own.

Rasugu rested his weight against the stone behind him, smiled, and sent his soul flying once again toward the Eyes of the Nayugu Raita.

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After throwing the Dreaded Spear at Karnan, Prince Tarsan spent two full days sleeping like the dead. Priestesses and attendants informed the King of Sangal that this was due to the severity of his wounds. Even when he was poked or prodded, he would not stir from his unnatural sleep. No one knew why—except Shuga.

Chagum was understandably very worried. Shuga tried to reassure him by saying, "Wounds of the soul are like wounds of the body. They take time to heal. That's all. I think Prince Tarsan will be all right."

The foreign guests and dignitaries that had been invited to the coronation ceremonies remained in the palace. The King of Sangal announced his intention to throw a grand farewell feast in five days' time, on the night of the full moon. It was also the same night that the Soul Return ceremony would be held for the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita. The King wanted to use this feast to bid his guests farewell on a more positive note.

The five days leading up to the feast were trying ones. Prince Tarsan received a harsh punishment called the Three-Day Judgement. This punishment was part of Sangal law and was only applied to those that harmed or intended to harm members of the royal family. Persons accused under this law had three days to defend themselves and attempt to justify their actions—or exonerate themselves. If the accused person's justification proved inadequate, they would be executed.

People started to speculate about when Tarsan would wake up so that he could mount a defense. They also wondered continuously after Karnan's health. The future of the royal family of Sangal and Sangal's place of power on the world stage had radically shifted overnight. It seemed that no one would know anything for certain about the future for at least five days. All that could be done was to wait for Prince Tarsan to wake up.

On the morning of the third day after Tarsan threw the Dreaded Spear at Karnan, his eyes finally opened. He looked around himself and was shocked to discover that he was bound to his bed. "What's all this?" he muttered. When he attempted to loosen his bonds, pain shot through his right arm. He groaned. It seemed that he was injured. He felt bandages around his arm, but they chafed like they'd been wrapped too tight.

When he looked around the room, he noticed soldiers standing in vigilant poses along the wall across from him. They were guarding him as if he were some kind of dangerous criminal. Strange. Was he having a nightmare?

"Hey, let me go! What are you all standing around for?"

The guards exchanged uncomfortable glances.

"Stop ignoring me!" Tarsan struggled against his bonds and thought about how all of this could have happened. He did remember drinking just a little too much at the feast last night, but only a little. Had he done something violent after that? Something illegal? But no, he wasn't that kind of person...and besides, he distinctly remembered

returning to his room after the feast. He remembered, vaguely, that he'd been concerned about Eshana. Everything else after that was a blank.

So I went to my room, fell asleep, woke up, did something terrible and now I'm tied up here?

Tarsan's guards whispered something to one another. Eventually, one of them left the room. Some time passed before the sound of many footsteps echoed in the corridor outside his room. The door opened; people marched in one by one.

Tarsan watched his father, sisters, several aunts and their Island Guardian husbands line up along the wall. Legal clerks and scribes entered the room last. Tarsan felt the blood vessels around his heart constrict with anxiety. Everyone's expressions were cold and stern as they looked at him. His ears started buzzing from panic.

This has to be a dream. Come on, Tarsan, wake up. I hate this!

"Tarsan," the King said. He did not say his name in his usual affectionate tone. His voice was like ice. "Please tell the clerks everything you have done up until now. I expect you to tell the truth."

"Father? Please, wait," Tarsan said in a voice like a cry. "Please, tell me what's happened. Why am I bound? What did I do?"

Everyone looked at Tarsan in confusion.

"I have absolutely no idea what's going on," Tarsan said." I just woke up, and now all this is happening, and now I—"

"Be silent, Tarsan," the King said in the same cruel tone as before. Reading his expression, Tarsan could tell that his father did not believe him. As he looked at his son, the King of Sangal's expression morphed into one of contempt. "Are you truly saying you do not remember?"

At the King's frigid tone, Tarsan's guts turned to water. "Yes...I really don't remember what I did. Did I injure someone when I was drunk?"

Whispers broke out among Tarsan's sisters. The King's expression contorted in rage. "I never believed you'd be such a coward. I thought you'd be genuinely ashamed of your crimes and own up to them like a man. You asked if you hurt someone when you were drunk?" The King

shook his head. "Claiming that you do not remember and facing us all so calmly is an affront to your honor, and to ours."

This was the first time Tarsan had ever seen his father this angry.

"Were you so blind drunk that you don't even remember hurling a spear at your brother?!"

Tarsan felt like he'd been struck by lightning. He opened his eyes wide and stared at his father. *I...attacked Karnan...with a spear?*

He noticed that Karnan alone out of all his siblings was not present in the room. Tarsan felt like someone had wrapped a hand around his heart and was squeezing it. He gasped, "I...at Karnan? I threw a spear at him?"

The King's shoulders shook as he said with a roar: "You threw the Dreaded Spear at Karnan! Before the eyes of all our guests! Clearly you planned to kill him. The throw was so hard that the spear's point is still lodged in the wall! None can dislodge it! Do you understand?"

A low, tremulous sound buzzed in Tarsan's ears. "Kill...my brother. Did I...do that?"

Tarsan felt cold all over. His heart beat wildly, its rhythm clearly audible in his own ears and picking up speed. His vision went dark and the room began to spin. Tarsan desperately gulped in air.

"And you still claim that you do not remember?" the King said with a sneer. His voice was hoarse from his outburst. "I came to hear your reasons, but I realize now that this was a fool's errand."

Tarsan looked at his father's and sisters' faces. The only person that showed any trace of sympathy at all was Saluna.

Believe in me, father! I would never make up an excuse out of cowardice. I truly and honestly do not remember!

The King shook his head slowly. "You are an embarrassment and a stain upon the honor of this family. To think my son would be such a man."

Saluna struggled to form words. She wanted to deny what the King said. Tarsan was short-tempered, true, but he was not the sort of

person to deny his own guilt. She believed him when he said that he couldn't remember what he'd done. Tarsan was generally a poor liar and a worse actor. With her heart wavering, Saluna stared at Tarsan and ached when she saw him reaching out mutely to her for some kind of sympathy or understanding. She dropped her gaze to the floor.

"It seems that we still can't fully make sense of this situation. Before dozens of foreign guests, you clearly and violently attacked the next King of Sangal. No other sentence but the Three-Day Judgment is just. If we deal lightly with the matter of a younger brother attacking his older brother, the remnants of resentment and distrust will linger for years to come."

Tarsan felt like his heart was being ripped out by an eagle's talons. Saluna gasped in alarm. The King had as good as pronounced a death sentence on Tarsan. The people gathered in the room stared at Tarsan in silent shock. The light went out of Tarsan's eyes.

"We cannot risk more rebellion," the King said. "Go down to the barracks and inform Prince Tarsan's personal guard of his judgment."

Tarsan was released from his bonds so that he could get out of bed, but his hands were immediately bound behind his back. The soldiers guided him down to the barracks. He followed their lead as mutely and expressionlessly as a statue. He passed through a long dim hallway toward the outer courtyard of the barracks, a shell of his former self. He moved where he was directed, but that was all.

As Tarsan approached the entrance to the courtyard, walking with an unsteady gait, he paused briefly and thought, *This must be a dream. It can't be anything but a dream.*

The men who served as Tarsan's personal guard were already assembled in the courtyard. They stood surrounded by other soldiers of the King. Their stiff postures and troubled faces betrayed their nervousness. When they saw the King and his procession, Tarsan's personal guards all snapped their mouths shut and stood at attention.

The King stood upon a dais in the courtyard and surveyed the assembled men. He ordered Tarsan to ascend to the dais as well. When

his personal guards saw that his hands were bound, they erupted in outrage.

Tarsan had grown up with all of them as a true man of the sea. They were all brothers of the sea, Yaltash Shuri. Every one of them had complete and absolute faith in Tarsan.

"I am sure that all of you would like to hear with Prince Tarsan has done," the King said. "This person was once my beloved son. He would have led Sangal's armies. But in his blind unthinking rage, he threw all that away by attacking his brother with a spear, gravely wounding him. Furthermore, he claims to have been so drunk at the time that he does not remember his grievous misdeed."

Tarsan's guards shouted in consternation. When they'd first heard of Prince Tarsan's attack on Crown Prince Karnan some days before, they'd been greatly perplexed. They knew Tarsan's character well. They considered that Karnan may have done or said something to injure Tarsan's pride. But blaming his attack on Karnan on too much drink was emphatically *not* like Tarsan. He might be hotheaded, but he didn't make excuses for himself.

The King's voice echoed with rage and carried to the edges of the courtyard. "From now on, unless new facts come to light that exonerate this person, he is considered a traitor to the crown. From this one that shamefully avoids telling the truth, I divest all of his royal titles and status. He shall become a commoner and shall be executed according to the law."

Silence fell among the assembled soldiers. Then someone called out in an unsteady voice, "Prince Tarsan is no coward, and no traitor!"

"Lord King, please reconsider..."

First one, then another, then all of Prince Tarsan's men rose their voices in appeal to the King. The sound of his friends' voices hit him like a punch to the gut. Up until this moment, Tarsan had been more than half-convinced that all of this was a dream, but the sight of his friends and allies standing with him drew his absolute and total focus. They were real, which meant the rest of this might be, too. He felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of cold water over his head.

If his friends tried to save him now, they'd be branded traitors, too. Tarsan sucked in a breath and called out in a voice so loud that his voice cracked, "*Dalgana*!"

The soldiers fell silent at once and looked at him. *Dalgana* was a military command that had been drilled into every soldier in the

courtyard. The command called for immediate quiet and stillness. Every man obeyed the command without thinking.

My brothers.

Tarsan's next words were uttered in a resonating tone like his father's, but he felt oddly disconnected from himself as he said them. "I will make no excuses to you, father, for cowardice. I am no coward. I truly do not remember what I have done. But my father and my sisters all claim to have seen me do it. I have no choice but to trust them. I have vowed unswerving loyalty to the King of Sangal. No matter his judgment, I shall abide by his will."

Please let this be a dream. He clung to the idea, as hopeless as it was. While staring at his friends' faces in the failing light of the afternoon sun, Tarsan wondered vaguely when he would wake up.

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On the night of Tarsan's judgment, the Island Guardian Adol was drinking alone in his bedroom. His wife Karina had not returned all night. She was probably still in the Flower Pavilion. Men weren't permitted there, so Karina was free to linger with the other women and discuss whatever she liked.

Adol stared into his glass of chilled wine and summoned an image of his wife's face to him, its lines set in an expression of grim determination. He genuinely cared for her. Although their marriage had mainly served to strengthen the royal family's ties to Kalsh, Adol had always thought there was mutual respect and affection in their relationship, and he was fairly sure Karina felt the same way.

But as time had gone on, rifts had developed in their relationship. Not simply matters where they couldn't see eye-to-eye, but points of contention where they actively worked against one another.

Adol thought it was strange: Karina was a highly intelligent woman, but she somehow had not noticed or had chosen to ignore the widening gulf between them. Even though any failings in their relationship might pose a risk to the unified Sangal, she had not acted either to break things off with him or to mend fences. He wondered why.

Of course, Sangal had been protected thus far by the constant and unshakable loyalty of the women of the royal family. Few problems had arisen as a result of their mutual ties to the Island Guardians and the King of Sangal, since the interests of the Island Guardians and the royal family were largely aligned.

Certainly, the Sangal royal family was the primary force keeping Sangal's scattered islands united. Their influence and leadership had made Sangal a stable and recognized nation of power and prominence on the world stage for the past hundred years.

But it's different now.

With the continent to the south embroiled in endless war, the Talsh empire had spread over them like storm clouds, and in the end had engulfed them entirely. Now the Talsh had set their sights on Sangal. Adol understood clearly that they would cross the Yaltash and turn their gaze on the northern continent.

And what would become of Sangal then, caught in the middle as it was?

If the wind keeps changing, why not take advantage of it?

If foreign merchants were to be believed, the winds blowing from the south were currently the most profitable for trade. But there was something dangerous in those winds: hints of a coming storm on the horizon. Adol thought of Sangal as a ship, and he wanted to direct its sails. One mistake could cause the ship to careen into the storm, and the dream of a free and independent Sangal nation would sink beneath the waves.

In order to prevent that from happening, Adol saw no other option aside from joining the smaller Talsh navy to the larger Sangal fleet controlled by the royal family.

The Talsh language was much different from Sangalese. They worshiped different gods. But Adol had heard that they were deliberate thinkers that valued ideas and tools for their effectiveness and utility. They had a reputation of being clear-headed and decisive. He doubted that his life would be much worse as an Island Guardian under the Talsh empire's rule than it was now.

As he sat thinking, Adol realized something. He understood that he felt no love for Sangal whatsoever. Maybe the other Island Guardians felt the same? Of course, he loved his own island of Kalsh, but for the wider Sangal nation, he had no such affection. His love for the common people of Sangal was so distant and weak that it barely existed except as an obligation; something expected of him that he didn't feel.

I doubt Karina will understand.

Karina was only fulfilling her role. But it was a mistaken belief that the country was somehow integral to the functioning of the islands. Adol honestly did not know if the islands would be better off under their own sovereignty than they were under the King's. He suspected Karina would never forgive him for even thinking such a thing. The women of the royal family were taught and raised only to fight for the continued existence and preservation of the Sangal nation. Trying to change Karina's thinking on that would make her entire mental infrastructure crumble.

He wondered what Karina would do when the Talsh invaded. When she learned of his betrayal...

My wise Karina, what will become of you when Sangal falls? Will you understand that I did this to protect us, and our way of life? It wasn't an entirely selfish choice.

Sitting in his bedroom drinking, Adol started to nod off. He heard a voice call out to him and jerked awake. He saw no one else in the room with him. He heard only the sound of the evening wind blowing in through the open window.

"Am I hearing things?" he muttered. He closed his eyes, then heard the voice again.

"Lord Adol."

The voice was coming from the window. Adol stood up, retrieved his short sword sitting on top of his desk, and looked out of the window.

He gasped in surprise. In the courtyard below him, a soldier stood, silent and alone. His eyes were vacant and empty, not focusing on anything, but the soldier had shifted his stance to gaze directly up at Adol. His hair was wrapped around the back of his head, but Adol barely noticed.

"What do you want?" Adol asked.

"Lord Adol," the soldier said. "It's me. Yatonoi Rasugu."

Adol's eyes widened. He wanted to tell the soldier to stop joking...but the man's tone and mannerisms were very much like Rasugu's.

"I borrowed this soldier to come and tell you something important," Rasugu said.

Adol gulped. He knew that Rasugu was acquainted with magic, but this was the first time Adol had seen him move and speak while manipulating another person's body.

"We must speak quickly. I must be gone before your wife returns. The elite Talsh navy forces will soon cross into Sangal's waters."

"Wh...what?"

"Please inform the other Island Guardians. It is time for them to make up their minds. The time has come. One prince is dying from wounds inflicted by the other. Sangal's royal family has been shaken to its core. Now is the perfect time to strike. All the Island Guardians are currently in the capital. This makes them easy to mobilize. You shall prove our loyalty to us now.

"Our forces are strong. It is my estimation that the kingdom of Sangal will be as good as fallen in three days' time. Those who serve us will not be killed or made slaves, but will be granted freedom and wealth beyond their wildest imaginings. Urge the other Island Guardians to seize this chance."

Adol's face went white.

The soldier's face was blank and utterly expressionless as Rasugu continued to speak. "In order to prove your own loyalty, kill Prince Karnan and the King of Sangal. You do not have to do this immediately. I shall give you three days. When Prince Tarsan is executed three days from now, the King and Prince Karnan must die as well. This will be the proof of your loyalty to the Talsh, and shall grant you safety in our empire."

Adol's mouth opened, but no sound came out.

"The lives of you and your allies in exchange for the lives of the King and Prince Karnan. That's the deal. And the time for consideration is over. You must make a choice." Rasugu's tone was deadpan. He presented this choice as casually as if he were commenting on the weather.

"I will be watching you," Rasugu said. "My eyes are not limited only to this soldier's. I will be watching you, even when you do not expect to be watched. Do not forget."

The soldier rested three fingers on his chest. This was the Talsh salute. The soldier turned smartly around and withdrew.

Adol stood near his window and broke into a cold sweat. The stagnant night air filtering in through the courtyard carried the sweet scent of flowers. Adol stared out the window into the darkness. He’d

believed the approaching storm to be farther off, but now it was upon him. He'd barely been given time to blink.

He had to kill the King—and Prince Karnan—in less than three days. He felt entirely numb with shock. He gripped his windowsill with both hands and shook uncontrollably.

Chapter 4 - Saving Lives

Sometime before dawn, the soldiers guarding Prince Tarsan's prison cell heard footsteps coming from the stairs leading to the upper levels of the palace. Saluna appeared on the stairs, holding a pine torch aloft. Guards fanned out behind her on the staircase.

"The King has asked to see Tarsan one last time, to get him to confess and reveal any secrets he may have regarding Prince Karnan," she said to the soldiers guarding Tarsan's cell. "I have been sent to escort him to our father. Please release him into my custody."

The guards hesitated briefly, but they weren't going to disobey the commands of a royal princess of Sangal. Besides, even if Tarsan was released, his hands would still be bound behind his back with strong leather bonds. It was unlikely that he could hurt anyone else. They readied their swords, checked Tarsan's bonds, and tied a rope around his waist.

The guards opened Tarsan's cell and used the rope around his waist to yank him bodily forward. The rope was woven of two thick strands for durability. The soldier pulling Tarsan passed his end of the rope to one of the guards accompanying Saluna. When he noticed the insignia on the guard's chest, the soldier grew a bit suspicious. The guard's crest was not that of the King, but of Saluna's own personal guard.

But Saluna and her guards did not give Tarsan's prison guards time to speculate. The guard accepted the rope and started pulling Tarsan up the stairs, with Saluna and her escort following them. The top of the staircase opened out into a courtyard covered in the lingering blue mist of a pre-dawn morning. It was still half-dark; no one spoke as they crossed the courtyard. The air was heady with the sweet scent of rakushul flowers.

Tarsan stared at Saluna's back as he walked behind her. He wanted to call out to her. He felt like if he didn't say anything now, he might

never get a chance to talk to her again. He couldn't stand the idea that everyone else seemed to know exactly what evil thing he had done while he himself could remember nothing at all.

He was even more disturbed that his body had apparently acted on its own. He didn't remember making the decision to harm anyone, much less Karnan, which meant that he must have wished Karnan harm unconsciously. But he honestly didn't think that he harbored any grudges like that. He didn't understand it at all. Time must have gotten away from him somehow; maybe he'd just failed to think before he acted.

Had he *really* injured Karnan so badly with a spear? Then why couldn't he remember it?

He was happy that his father wanted to speak to him again. Perhaps that showed that he still had some fatherly consideration for Tarsan after all. Tarsan knew that he wouldn't be able to give his father a different answer than he'd given previously, though. He couldn't confess to a crime that he didn't remember.

Tarsan considered his plight as he walked, but realized after a while that the guards were not leading him anywhere near the King's quarters or the throne room. The King's quarters were off a hexagonal courtyard in the northern part of the palace. Tarsan knew that he was being led east. He quickened his steps and called out, "Saluna!"

Saluna turned to face him and brought a finger to her lips. They were standing at the rear of the palace's guest quarters, near a large freestanding shed that looked like an old storage building. Saluna paused and shifted her gaze from side to side, checking to make sure they hadn't been followed. Then she whispered something to the guards.

"Rasal, Nosh, Ganol, Sandol. Thank you so much. You've done more than enough. I'll handle things from here."

The loyal soldiers looked at their princess with expressions of concern. "Won't you reconsider, princess?" Sandol asked. "We are your guards. We would follow you to Hell if you asked. I am certain many

others feel the same way, including Prince Tarsan's personal guards. Perhaps we could steal a ship..."

Saluna smiled and shook her head. "Thank you. But you mustn't. You'd be breaking your oath to the King if you did something like that. All I ask is that you do not betray me, and that you never again break this country's laws."

Saluna shook each of the hands of her guards and thanked them personally. Saluna's plan had gotten them this far; now all that was left was to escape with Tarsan and cover their tracks. She passed her guards a letter to give to her sisters, absolving them of any wrongdoing and begging them not to punish her guards for obeying her. She didn't want any of her guards to suffer because of her. They could claim that they were just following orders and were ignorant of what she had planned.

Saluna started undoing Tarsan's bonds. He stared at her in shock.

"Saluna, you can't do this," Tarsan said in a strangled tone. "I can't let you take the blame for anything I've done."

"It's too late for that. Consider me compromised," Saluna said. "I led you out of that cell, but I can't make you disappear. That's the situation we're in. And I can't take back anything I've done up until now." She sighed. "Well, then. Let's go."

"Go? Where?" Tarsan looked up at the old storage building. Its walls and doorway were covered in vines; it clearly hadn't been used for quite some time.

Saluna dismissed her loyal guards with a wave of her hand and pushed open the door of the disused storage building. Then she took her brother's arm and led him into the musty darkness.

***

After Shuga discovered that Tarsan had been cursed, he'd cautioned Chagum to be extra-careful about the magic weaver in their midst. Chagum even allowed Shuga to sleep at the door to his bedroom.

There was no way for them to know what shape this magic weaver might take. It was impossible to be too careful in this situation.

The night after Tarsan had been sentenced, Shuga awoke from a fitful doze. His eyes scanned the room to determine what had awakened him as he reached down to draw his sword. He was absolutely certain that he'd heard something. He was just about to call for guards when he heard Chagum get up out of bed and approach the doorway.

Chagum glanced down at the sword in his hand. "Shuga?"

"I know, I know. I'll call the guards."

At just that moment, two shadows lengthened along the wall in Chagum's bedroom. When Shuga realized who the shadows belonged to, he dismissed any thought of calling the guards.

"Princess Saluna!" Chagum gasped, stunned. He extended his hands to Saluna and Tarsan, who where both breathing heavily.

"Crown Prince Chagum, please, help us."

Chagum stared slack-jawed at Saluna as she knelt to the ground and rested her forehead on the floor. She radiated an aura of helpless despair.

"I beg you! Our lives are in danger! Please, save us!"

Chagum was shocked silent for a moment. Then he knelt down and rested his hand on Saluna's shoulder. Her skin was cold and clammy; she was shivering. "Please don't bow to me, Princess Saluna. Look at me, and tell me what's going on."

Saluna's face rose from the floor. She fixed her eyes on Chagum. "Thank you for hearing us. I apologize for bringing you trouble. I couldn't think of any other way for us to survive." She paused. When she spoke again, her voice was no louder than a whisper. "You know that our father has condemned Tarsan to death in three days. This is the customary punishment for anyone that does deliberate harm to a member of the royal family. I begged my sisters to aid me until midnight last night, but they paid me no heed. If Tarsan really did intend to kill Karnan, he would be deserving of his punishment. I do not believe his

actions were intentional. Tarsan has no memory of attacking our brother at all."

Chagum and Shuga exchanged glances.

Saluna continued speaking in a tone of desperation: "I know how unbelievable it sounds. You're perfectly within your rights not to believe me, but I have known Tarsan since he was born. He can be violent, but he has never forgotten the wrongs he has done, nor has he ever tried to make excuses for his own behavior. Such conduct would be cowardly and detestable. Tarsan would rather die than be a coward.

"That's why I believe in him. I can't explain it any better than that. I could not, in good conscience, stand by and let him be executed for a crime that he does not remember."

Tarsan’s shoulders shook as he stared at the ground.

"My brother and I have thrown away everything we have, except our lives. All we want is to survive. Please, conceal us inside your baggage when you return to New Yogo. After we cross Sangal's border, we will flee, and trouble you no further.

"You are an honored guest, and the representative of a powerful allied nation. No one would dare search your baggage, not even the King. Even casting suspicion on you would be an insult.

"I know that we have only spoken a few times, and you have not known us for very long, but please...please! Help us."

Shuga approached Saluna and said in a low, severe tone, "Princess Saluna. Do you intend to sow a seed of distrust between our two nations?"

"Excuse me?"

"Shuga," Chagum said in a voice of warning.

"Forgive me if I seem rude," Shuga said, speaking to Chagum now. "It is as Princess Saluna says. Our bags will not be searched—at least not by the King of Sangal. But it would be foolish to think that the King and his family would somehow not notice that Princess Saluna and Prince Tarsan have gone missing. And when they do notice, they'll ask

the obvious question: Who among the foreign guests present for the coronation seemed most friendly with the prince and princess?

"The result will be that you will be suspected of betraying the King's trust, even if no one will be able to claim such with any certainty. Matters worsen when you consider speculation around your motivations for assisting Princess Saluna and Prince Tarsan. What other motive could you have, aside from usurping Karnan and installing Tarsan on the throne?"

"*Shuga!*" Chagum said in a voice sharp enough to cut. "Enough. They're trusting me with their lives." Chagum's tone brooked no argument. He exuded an aura of quiet strength. "Didn't you promise that you wouldn't try to shield me from any of the consequences of this plot? Do you expect me to stand by and watch them be killed? Closing my eyes and looking the other way now wouldn't just be cowardly; it would be idiotic. Let's just say that the King of Sangal would suspect us of everything you've speculated on. He won't have enough evidence to make his doubts public. And such vague points of contention and distrust are common between nations, even among allies. I don't believe relations between our nations would break down over such a trivial and baseless matter. In fact, I consider that impossible."

Shuga sighed. Chagum's mind was set on this; he doubted he could say anything to change it. Shuga took a step back from Saluna and

Tarsan and shook his head.

"I understand. I will accept your judgment in this matter, Your Majesty."

Saluna seemed shocked at Chagum's sudden outburst. He was characteristically calm and even-tempered; this was the first time she'd seen this other side of him. When Chagum shifted his gaze from Shuga to Saluna, she felt her heart skip a beat.

"I'm glad you trust me," Chagum said, "and I will do everything in my power to save you both."

"Thank you," Saluna said, fighting back tears. "Thank you, from the bottom of my heart."

Tarsan looked up and said, "Crown Prince Chagum, I offer you my deepest thanks and beg you to see my sister to safety."

"Tarsan?" Saluna asked, looking at him with a little frown. She shook her head and said harshly, "Tarsan, abiding by our father's judgment would not only be a stain upon your honor. It would be unjust. Do you truly intend to die for a crime you don't even remember committing?"

Tarsan couldn't quite meet her eyes.

"Running away is also dishonorable," Saluna said, "but it is better to run now and live to clear your name than it is to die here for no reason."

Tarsan took in Saluna's determined expression and gritted his teeth. He heaved a heavy sigh and closed his eyes.

"If we don't live through this," Saluna said, "we will never be able to repay Prince Chagum for his kindness." Saluna's pale face turned toward Chagum. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

Chagum shook his head. "You owe me nothing. I need no repayment. You don't deserve to carry such a burden. None of this is your fault—either of you. Prince Tarsan was cursed by someone."

Saluna and Tarsan looked at him with uncomprehending faces. Chagum told them how Tarsan had come to be cursed and how Shuga had discovered it. Finally being able to tell them both gave him a

tremendous sense of relief. "But," he said, remembering with a frown, "we don't have any evidence left behind from the magic weaver's curse, so there's not much we can do to prove it."

Saluna, stunned silent, felt like collapsing to the floor again. "How...why...why was Tarsan cursed?"

Tarsan leaned toward Chagum and Shuga and asked hoarsely, "Is the reason I can't remember what I did to Karnan because I was cursed?"

"Yes, probably," Shuga said. "I can't be completely certain, but I do suspect that's the case."

Tarsan's face suddenly turned bright red. He slammed both fists into the floor. "Shit! Who cursed me? Who? When I find that bastard I'll..." He looked directly up at Shuga.

"Our best evidence for the curse is that seashell ring," Chagum said.

Shuga nodded and retrieved the ring from his breast pocket. When he saw it, Tarsan's eyes sparked in recognition.

"That's Eshana's ring," he said. "It's unmistakable. But she should have it. You're saying I had it? You found it on me? Why?"

"Who is Eshana?" Chagum asked.

"The girl that's become the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita," Saluna muttered. "She's a fisherman's daughter, from Kalsh. Tarsan treats her like a little sister."

"Ah, I understand now," Shuga said. His eyebrows furrowed together.

Chagum looked at Shuga with an expression of mild irritation. "What do you understand?" Chagum asked.

"I think it is possible that this girl is not actually the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita," Shuga said. "Someone wants us to think she is. She may be just like Tarsan when he was cursed—an empty vessel manipulated like a puppet."

"A puppet?" Saluna asked.

"Yes," Shuga said. "It seems that very powerful magic weavers can directly manipulate the souls and bodies of other people. I'm sure some people would be more difficult to control than others, but I also doubt that controlling a young girl would pose much of a challenge for such a magic weaver."

Chagum nodded. "I think I understand, too. A girl under the magic weaver's control is assumed to be the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita and infiltrates the palace without anyone becoming suspicious. But for such a close friend of Prince Tarsan to be used in this way... Could there be a reason?" Chagum paused and frowned. "But no, that's wrong. That little girl smelled like the water of Nayugu. I'm sure of it."

"Oh... Yes, I had almost forgotten that."

Saluna and Tarsan glanced back and forth between Chagum and Shuga, clearly not understanding their conversation. Tarsan broke in suddenly, unable to sit in silent ignorance: "Um...what is the water of Nayugu, and what does it smell like?"

Chagum blinked and looked at Tarsan. "I...smelled the water of another world. Compared to this world's water, it's more....vivid? Intense? It's hard to explain, but I wouldn't mistake it for anything else. When Eshana arrived in the hall with the guests and passed me, the smell was clinging to her."

Saluna shifted her gaze from Chagum to Shuga. "But the tool Tarsan was cursed by was Eshana's ring. It seems we can at least verify that the magic weaver used her for that purpose."

Chagum nodded and looked at Shuga. "Could we try a Soul Call for Eshana? We may find out the truth about the curse if we can summon her soul back to her body."

Shuga sighed and shook his head. "Your Majesty, I must be honest. Performing a Soul Call for the girl is beyond my capabilities. The magic weaver behind Prince Tarsan's curse is far more powerful and experienced than I am. The girl may be some kind of trap. It may be the case that anyone that touches her will be cursed as Tarsan was."

Chagum heard the sound of footsteps from the hallway, then more muffled sounds of people stirring. The sun was rising, its light faintly visible through the room's windows.

Shuga faced Saluna and Tarsan. "We won't give up on figuring out this curse. Fortunately, Prince Karnan's condition is stable, and Prince Tarsan's life has been spared so far. If we can discover the magic weaver and find proof of their wrongdoing, it is still possible for your family to reconcile.

"Of course, I'm still concerned about the overall plot against Sangal's royal family. Right now, I think our safest choice is to have Princess Saluna send a letter containing all the details that we know across the border to New Yogo, preferably to someone that the royal family can trust. Aside from that, we must exhaust every effort to make sure you stay safe and hidden."

Saluna and Tarsan faced each other, then nodded together. They had an answer to why Tarsan had attacked Karnan without remembering it: he had been cursed. But they'd still been forced to run away from their normal lives and would have to consider new ways to cope. When they'd first learned of the curse, something in them had deflated, but they seemed steadier now. It was still possible that their lives might be spared...at the expense of their family, their social status, and their home. When they thought about their lives just a few short days ago, they felt like baby birds that had fallen out of their nest just after hatching.

Seeing their faces, Chagum said in an encouraging tone, "Putting everything aside for the moment...you two made quite the entrance. To think that there are secret passages in these walls! The Sangal royal family is formidable indeed. You could assassinate anyone in the palace you wanted at any time, in total secrecy. I should be terrified of you."

Saluna went a shade paler, but then she smiled. "We have no such murderous intent. The men of the royal family have no knowledge of these passages." Her smile deepened. "Which means that the women are more to be feared than the men in my family, I suppose. We have far

more effective methods at our disposal than murder. These passages were originally created so that we might spy on our guests in secret, and...win them over, if that proved necessary."

Chagum blinked at her, then blushed faintly pink. "Oh. Uh... I see."

Seeing Chagum's flustered expression, made warmth return to Saluna's chilled limbs. She smiled at Tarsan. "You are the first man ever to travel that passage—or any passage in the palace."

Tarsan's expression contained a mix of complex emotions, as if he was searching for the appropriate reaction to what he was hearing and wasn't quite able to figure out what that would be. He flicked his eyes nervously from Saluna to Chagum.

The genuine affection in the smile that Saluna gave Tarsan pierced Chagum's heart. "You are strong, and resilient—both of you. I think you could have a very good life for yourselves even without your family's status."

"You may be right," Saluna said. "Maybe this is for the best. Whenever we travel by sea, there are certain words drilled into us, almost from the day we're born. Would you like to hear them?"

Chagum nodded.

"If your ship is wrecked in a storm," Saluna said, "don't try to save the ship. Think only of survival. As long as you survive, a new path will appear before you."

At her words, several faces flashed across Chagum's memory: all the faces of the people that had told him to survive no matter the cost. He had trusted them with his life. Now Saluna and Tarsan were trusting him with theirs.

The people that had protected Chagum had exhausted all their strength and used every advantage they possessed to keep him safe. When he thought of them, he felt warmth and light spread through his chest like an affirming flame.

Chapter 5 - The Wheel of Fate

Surina summoned all her strength and dragged her ship bodily up the beach. She avoided the main harbor where many other ships were clustered together, choosing to come to shore along the mouth of the Rogo river. Compared to the harbor, her landing site was completely deserted. She wiped away sweat and took in the sight of colorful cargo barges lining the river on each side.

She'd finally completed her solitary voyage to the capital, but that didn't mean her promise was fulfilled. She still had to find Prince Tarsan—and she feared the remaining obstacles in her way.

She knew that some of Prince Tarsan's personal guards originally came from Kalsh. Three, or maybe even four would know her by sight, and most of those should know her name. This was a tenuous connection at best, but she had little else to go on. This was the first time she'd ever been to the capital.

After thinking things over, Surina decided that she should probably try to find the market first. Every inhabited island she'd ever been to had an open market that traded in goods and supplies as well as news and gossip. She might be able to find someone who knew where Prince Tarsan's guards were. She could at least ask around.

She walked along a strip of colorful makeshift buildings that certainly looked like a market some time in the late afternoon. The sun beat down on her shoulders, hot, and for a moment she thought she was walking in a fever dream. Impossibly high white walls of houses and other structures enclosed the enormous market district. Shops clustered together, sometimes right on top of each other; each shop's roof or awning seemed to be a different bright color. She'd never seen some of the colors before. When the sunlight reflected off the white walls and kaleidoscopic roofs, the contrast was so overwhelming that it make Surina dizzy. Her legs shook like jelly, as if she'd just come off her

ship and was trying to find her land legs again. The world shook around her as if she were experiencing her own personal earthquake.

And then there were the people! They were everywhere, pushing past her, moving around her in a whirl. Her heart beat faster in anxiety at being so thoroughly surrounded. The air carried the scent of powerful spices as well as body odors like sweat and excrement. She found it hard to breathe and wished for some sort of breeze, or a wind strong enough to banish the heat entirely.

Suddenly, she entered a comparatively clear space in the market and felt a cool breeze on her skin. The capital's market was about ten times the size of the island markets that she was familiar with. Surina stood still in the shade of a white wall and caught her breath.

The size of the market was gargantuan compared to what she was used to, but many of the sights and smells around her were familiar; she let those similarities ground her in her surroundings. She clutched her money pouch close to her chest so that it wouldn’t be stolen, then approached a market stand that sold sweets.

"Do you know where Prince Tarsan's personal guards are?" she asked the kindly-looking middle-aged woman behind the shop counter. She was frying sweets in oil. Her hands were coated in brown sugar.

"All the soldiers live in the barracks along the eastern end of the palace, near the cliffs," the woman said. "But why would you need to go there?"

"An acquaintance gave me a message to deliver if I passed by the capital," Surina said.

The woman's shoulders collapsed. "I'm afraid that's impossible. You won't be able to deliver your message."

"Huh? Why?"

"No one is permitted to leave or enter the barracks right now," the woman said.

Surina caught most of the woman's reply, but her voice was drowned out by the sound of children's voices approaching the sweets stand. Surina found herself ignored in favor of paying customers.

Someone tugged at her sleeve; she turned to see a beggar standing behind her, smiling. His skin was dark with soot and filth and most of his teeth were missing.

"Do you have anything to spare? If you do, I'll tell you why no one can go in or out of the barracks right now."

Surina hesitated, then placed the money that she'd intended to use to buy candy into the beggar's hand. His nails were curved in and grotesquely long.

The beggar relaxed his shoulders and said, "Entry is forbidden to the barracks because Prince Tarsan has run away from the palace." He extended his hand with a grin.

Prince Tarsan had run away? Of course she desperately wanted to know what had happened, but she didn't need to learn that from this beggar. She shook her head at his outstretched hand. "I'm sure I can find other people to talk to. My father always told me that information bought for coin is always embellished with lies. I'd rather learn the truth from someone else. Goodbye."

She turned her back on him, but the beggar followed, flapping his hands in haste. "Wait! I'll tell everything I know for five chal!"

Surina walked faster.

"Wait! If you give me five chal, I won't just tell you what I know, I'll lead you to someone that can get in and out the palace still. He's from Kalsh; knows all the soldiers."

Surina stopped and turned around. "Who is he?"

The beggar fixed her with a hungry stare, as if she were a fish that that just taken the bait. "Man by the name of Rakora. He's got just the one arm."

Uncle Rakora!

Rakora was not really her uncle, but a close friend of her father's. Surina looked at the beggar, trying to determine if he was telling the truth. She knew Rakora well; he and her father had often played together as children and she'd often visited his home on Kalsh. When he'd first settled on Kalsh, her father had brought him rich gifts of

expensive wine. He'd also stopped by his home often to trade news of the world.

Surina had not seen Rakora on Kalsh for a long time, but she did remember her father telling her that he'd retired from military service and become a merchant after the loss of his arm. Surina removed five chal from her money pouch. The beggar tried to snatch it from her, but she closed her hand quickly, protecting the coins.

"You're a wary one, missy. But I'll keep my word. Follow me to Rakora's store. He's good to people. When he hears your story, I'm sure he'll help you."

Surina followed the beggar into an alley that intersected a huge main street. They crossed it, then entered another alley, narrower than the first; Surina suddenly feared that the beggar was leading her into danger. They stopped at a place selling drinks at the end of another alley near an outer wall of the market, and the quality of the light overhead told Surina that the sun was beginning to set.

The beggar stopped outside a gaudy-looking wine shop and beckoned to Surina. "This one's Rakora's. Pay up."

The shop didn't appear to be open. The wooden door was stuck shut and would not open when she pushed it. Surina said nothing to the beggar and searched for a back entrance. She found a window and peered into the gloomy interior of the store. She saw people moving inside and heard low voices.

"Uncle Rakora?" she called out.

There was a muffled response. A few moments later, a large man in a loincloth emerged from the shop. His hair was much thinner than she remembered, and he had gained a little weight but he was undoubtedly Rakora, her father's friend. Surina was so relieved that she nearly cried. She gritted her teeth to control her feelings, returned to the front of the building, and paid the beggar five chal. The beggar accepted the money quickly and withdrew.

"Now then... Who are you?" Rakora's expression was puzzled, as if he didn't recognize her but felt that he should. Surina understood why:

she hadn't seen him since she was ten years old, when she'd visited him with her whole family.

"Uncle Rakora. I'm Surina—a Rassharou."

"Huh? Oh, Surina! Rana's daughter, right?"

Surina nodded.

"What are you doing out here all alone? Your dad's nearby, right? Probably came to ask me about something or other..."

"My father is..." Surina began, but couldn't finish; she couldn't talk about that right now. "Well, I have something important to tell you." Her voice shook. When she'd first caught sight of her father's old friend, something within her had snapped.

"Oi, you all right? You look like you're about to fall over."

Rakora hurriedly gripped Surina's elbow and guided her into a house next to the wine shop. His house in the capital was much grander than the house he kept on Kalsh. Its style was like that of the other homes she had seen, with bright white walls and an expansive view of a magnificent garden through the rear windows. A cool breeze blew in from the garden. The floor beneath her feet was soft and sweet-smelling; it had been woven of dried palm leaves. She shifted her gaze to an interior room, which she and Rakora entered. He encouraged her to lie down for a while.

"You should stay here tonight. Wait here for a little while, and when I come home after work we can eat and talk together. You should rest until I return. If I don't get back to the shop soon, the others will close it up on me."

Surina still felt anxious, but she was too exhausted to reply. The moment she laid down and closed her eyes, the sounds of the outside world instantly receded. She fell into a deep sleep.

Rakora's shop was thriving. Nights were the time when he made the most profit. His wife came home before he did, as well as several other workers from the store, and started making dinner. Rakora's wife called out to Surina when dinner was ready; she woke up and emerged from her guest room to eat.

Surina greeted Rakora's wife politely and took a seat on the floor. Lined up all along the floor of the room were dishes of baked fish and fresh tropical fruit. When Rakora finally returned from work, everyone settled down to eat. Rakora ate rapidly and without pause as he listened to Surina's story. He encouraged her to keep speaking until the movement of his hand slowed and he'd finally eaten his fill.

Even after eating, Rakora remained sitting and listening. He asked his wife to take care of things at the store for him, then fixed his full attention on Surina. "What on earth are you saying, girl?" he asked, resting his chin in his hand. "It's unbelievable! It's impossible! You couldn't have come at a worse time."

Surina cringed, but then she remembered something. "Uncle Rakora. I heard in the market that Prince Tarsan ran away from the palace. Is that true?"

Rakora told her that Prince Tarsan had attacked Crown Prince Karnan. He'd been sentenced to the Three-Day Judgment, but before his sentence could be carried out, he'd managed to escape the palace with Princess Saluna.

"Of course, there's still a lot we don't know," Rakora said. "It's true enough that not many know the palace as well as Princess Saluna. I heard everything from my daughter, Tsura."

Tsura worked as one of Princess Saluna's attendants in the palace. Rakora's younger sister also served Saluna. When Saluna had heard

from his sister about the loss of his arm and that he'd been forced to retire, she had offered Tsura a position. Tsura was a bright and observant girl; Princess Saluna had taken a liking to her right away. When Rakora had first opened his wine shop, Princess Saluna had been the first to patronize it. She frequently sent attendants to buy wine for the royal palace. Much of his success as a wine merchant was thanks to her.

"Tsura still works in the palace. She's been transferred to the kitchen, along with Princess Saluna's other attendants and maids." He shook his head. "Something truly terrible must have happened."

Surina's vision dimmed around the edges. The exhaustion of her long journey and relief at having finally arrived left her completely wiped out. And Prince Tarsan—who she'd been depending on to keep her promise—was entirely out of reach.

"What should I do?" Rakora asked. "None of this would ever have happened if General Yunan were still alive. I've received your report, but I don't know what the proper Rassharou response to it would be. I used to trust the Island Guardians, but that Adol fellow ain't trustworthy. If we tell the wrong people about this, it might get us killed," Rakora grumbled, sticking out his chin in a pose of dissatisfaction. "All right. Let's think things over tonight. I'm making a delivery to the palace tomorrow; I'll run it all past Tsura then. We'll see what she thinks."

Rakora sighed heavily, placed his hand on his knee and stood up. "It seems that a huge wave is about to engulf Kalsh. An ill wind blows from that direction. It may be that Prince Tarsan and Princess Saluna reacted out of grief over what happened to Eshana...but it's no use speculating. It is what it is."

Surina lifted her head quickly. "Uncle Rakora? Do you know what happened to Eshana? Where is she?"

"Ah...it's sad, it is, but she's to be given to the sea at the Soul Return ceremony at the night of the full moon. Just a few days from now."

"What? But if her soul returns, don't they have to cancel the ceremony?"

Rakora looked at her strangely. Surina had a feeling that he believed she was talking nonsense. "I think that's true...but I've heard no word that her soul has returned."

Surina opened her mouth, then closed it. She'd seen Eshana dancing under the sea. She'd seen her soul rise to the north toward the capital like a shooting star. Why hadn't her soul returned? Had all of what Surina had seen been a dream?

Surina felt a pang of deep inconsolable grief. What should she do now? She felt even smaller and more insignificant now than she had as a solitary voyager across the sea. She wiped tears out of the corners of her eyes. She kept her gaze on Rakora's retreating back as he prepared to return to his store.

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The King of Sangal informed his guests of Princess Saluna and Prince Tarsan's flight the morning after their disappearance. Being betrayed by two children at once weighed heavily on him; his tone was touched with hints of bitterness and regret.

"Please excuse me," a woman said quietly to Chagum.

Chagum looked up at her. She greatly resembled Saluna, but she was older. She met his eyes and bowed deeply.

"Princess Karina." Chagum stood and returned the bow.

"Crown Prince Chagum, I must apologize. Princess Saluna, who has served you until now, has shamefully fled. I make no excuses for her, but I beg your forgiveness." Her tone was sincerely apologetic, but Chagum felt her eyes piercing him, looking for some tell-tale sign. She clearly had not come to apologize, but to determine Saluna's current whereabouts.

"I accept your apology and thank you for your consideration," Chagum said with perfect calm. "It is my sincerest wish that Crown Prince Karnan's health continues to improve."

"Thank you. His condition remains stable. I also thank you for the precious gift of medicine from your own nation. The women of Sangal's royal family are indebted to Your Highness and Lord Shuga. You are wise beyond your years, as the saying goes. Everyone is saying how envious they are of New Yogo."

Karina smiled ruefully at him. "The Sangal kingdom has never experienced such shameful behavior in all of its history. I had thought Saluna a more prudent person, but..."

Chagum shook his head. "I understand that Princess Sauna's behavior cannot be forgiven, but I believe she was motivated to act out of a sincere love for her brother. I also envy those who live in the Sangal kingdom. This is the first time I've ever seen such deep love expressed between members of a family. Such bonds are to be treasured, even if..."

Karina stared at Chagum. "I am sure Saluna would be pleased that you think of her that way." Her expression softened as she considered what Chagum had said, transforming her entire demeanor. It was as if she had set aside her dignified mask to talk to him as a person.

But Chagum was wary. This could be a practiced tactic that Princess Karina used to draw people in.

Breakfast had just started; loud conversations surrounded them. Karina whispered so that she wouldn't be overheard. "Crown Prince Chagum, you may have guessed that I am seeking to discover my sister's whereabouts. If you should catch sight of her, give her a message. Tell her that if she's had a change of heart, she should come to the Flower Pavilion. I can do nothing for Tarsan now, but I want Saluna's life to be spared, at least."

Chagum looked at Karina and nodded.

"I pray that you will have the opportunity to deliver my message very soon."

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Tarsan and Saluna passed much of the day hiding inside Chagum's walk-in closet. When laundresses and maids entered to tidy things up, they pressed their backs to the wall and hid in the corner with the largest amount of clothes. They stood there stock still, holding their breaths and waiting for the closet door to close again.

A bit of light filtered in through a crack in the door, shining along the narrow pathway along the edges of the rows of clothes. Something shiny glinted in the shaft of light. When Saluna leaned forward to look closer, she saw a golden brooch inlaid with pearls just outside the closet door.

Her eyes opened wide. She was rooted to the spot. That brooch belonged to Karina. Saluna knew immediately what her seeing the brooch meant: Karina knew that she and Tarsan were in Chagum's rooms. Saluna didn't think she'd left a trail to follow, so she wondered how Karina had found her.

Judging by the position of the brooch, Karina had probably entered Chagum's rooms sometime in the early morning and left it where it would be easy to discover. Perhaps she'd noticed the dust disturbed outside the closet door and made a guess.

Karina's message was clear: *I, and all the other royal women in the palace, know that you are here.*

Saluna made no move to take the brooch. Karina must not have told anyone where she was yet. If she had, Saluna would already be in the dungeon with Tarsan, or led before her father to be sentenced. Perhaps the brooch was a sign that Karina wanted to help her in some way? She could sell the brooch and get a decent amount of money to start a new life elsewhere.

Saluna was one of the King's daughters: she had been raised to examine a situation from every possible angle before she acted. She couldn't ignore the possibility that the brooch was a trap. It wouldn't be easy to sell in any case; she couldn't leave the palace and the

craftsmanship would be easily recognized by merchants. Selling it would betray her location to Karina for certain, with only the faint hope of gaining enough money to survive in return.

After the maids finished cleaning, Saluna and Tarsan concealed themselves inside the dusty secret passage in Chagum's room and discussed Saluna's discovery of the brooch.

Tarsan said nothing for a while. He stared down at his clenched fists. "I still feel like all of this is a dream. I always thought I'd be able to face down any enemy, no matter how strong they were. But my own strength has been used against me, to hurt Karnan." Suddenly, Tarsan was overwhelmed by the devotion that he felt for his family. "I have his blood on my hands." He gritted his teeth, unable to hold his emotions in any longer. Tears fell from the corners of his eyes down his cheeks. "I'm not the sort of person that runs away like a dog with its tail between its legs. And if I were the sort of person that would kill my own brother in cold blood, I would kill myself with my own hands."

Saluna had been lost in thought, but she returned her full focus to Tarsan. "I've been thinking about your curse all this time, too. Who is this magic weaver? Who has the most to gain by killing you and Karnan?"

She was looking at Tarsan, but her gaze was distant and unfocused, as if she was staring at something that was very far away. "The people of Sangal don't have much use for magic," she said. "Certainly, curses are uncommon. If they were commonly employed as a tactic, I would have learned about them as part of my education."

"Chagum told us that the curse uses dolga root and comes from Yogo," Tarsan said. "I don't want to doubt him, I *really* don't, but is it possible that this plot could have originated in New Yogo instead? Maybe everything he's done has been to lure us into a trap."

Saluna shook her head. "I don't believe that. He didn't have to tell us about the curse in the first place. It was obvious that we didn't know about it. And besides, Sangal is the shield that defends New Yogo from invasion from the south. New Yogo has no reason to threaten us."

Suddenly, Saluna's line of sight wavered. She stared into space, her expression transforming slowly into one of shock.

"Saluna?" Tarsan asked.

Saluna rapidly scanned through her memories, looking for connections and ideas and adding them to her mental map of the situation. She remembered what Karina had told her in the Flower Pavilion about the spy from Yogo on the Talsh ship concealing his message in an anchor chain. She knew that the spy had connections to at least some of the Island Guardians. The encoded message had been from the spy to Lord Adol. And the magic weaver was using a curse that came from Yogo. Whoever had cursed Eshana's ring was...

Saluna shook her head. "It could still be someone else from Yogo." She looked at Tarsan. "New Yogo was settled by colonizers from Yogo two hundred and fifty years ago. The people of New Yogo originally came from the southern continent.

"But Yogo," she said, "was conquered by the Talsh empire, much more recently. Yogo wouldn't think of taking over Sangal now; they don't have the power or the resources. But Talsh does. Just because Yogo was conquered by them doesn't mean all the Yogo people were exterminated. The Talsh aren't stupid. I've heard they make effective use of the people they conquer."

Tarsan's eyes contained a glimmer of comprehension, but it was clear that he still didn't completely understand her. "So...Talsh conquered Yogo, then sent a magic weaver here to make me kill Karnan? But how would someone from Yogo know about me and Eshana? That's what bothers me the most about all this. When the magic weaver used the ring I gave her, did he know about the connection between us? How?"

"Lord Adol must have mentioned it."

"Adol?" Tarsan asked, sounding surprised. He and Adol didn't really get along, for all that Adol was an Island Guardian and his oldest sister's husband. But he didn't think their relationship was so poor that Adol would involve himself in a plot to kill him and Karnan.

Saluna told Tarsan about the suspicions Karina had relayed to the other royal women in the Flower Pavilion. She now had no more doubts involving Adol's involvement in this plot. Adol was an intelligent man, but proud and arrogant, and his pride had clearly led him down a self-serving road that he'd determined to be the most advantageous to himself. She could easily imagine how that might have happened.

If Adol stood to make a profit, he'd definitely sell out the royal family. That's just the kind of man he was. Saluna shivered with fear. Right now, all of the Island Guardians were here in the palace. If the Island Guardians were conspiring with the Talsh to overthrow the royal family, Sangal was as good as conquered. It would be easy to ensure that Karnan died of his wounds. With Tarsan disgraced, the royal family had no other heirs of proper age to inherit. If the Talsh had orchestrated all this, they had planned well.

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Unburdening herself to Rakora relieved Surina so much that she felt like a new person, but it also left her exhausted and hopeless. She had no idea what she should do next. She caught a fever in the night after having dinner. When Rakora came to see her before making his delivery to the palace, she was sound asleep and burning up.

Think of the wheel of fate as a set of interlocking gears that revolve around a common axis. Once in a great while, a larger gear will cross teeth with a much smaller one, giving the smaller gear a strong, if brief, influence over future events. Surina, the poor Rassharou girl that had traveled to the capital of Sangal all alone to deliver a message of great importance, was a small gear, and she was about to set the wheel of fate into motion.

While Surina slept, Rakora delivered her message to his daughter Tsura, who in turn delivered it to reliable friends inside the palace, including one of Princess Karina's attendants. By the end of the day, Princess Karina herself had heard Surina's message. Karina went

immediately to the King, who immediately informed his generals of an impending attack by the Talsh navy. They used no palace carrier pigeons to convey messages to the generals, for Karina was certain their communications were being monitored. Instead, Karina mobilized the secret communication network of the royal women of Sangal—a watchful set of elite and utterly loyal men scattered on uninhabited islands throughout the kingdom, each equipped with carrier pigeons of their own.

The message that Surina had carried at so much personal cost was indeed worth a barrel of gold to the King of Sangal, just as Dogol had said. It included details of Talsh's numbers and deployment, as well as what kind of routes they preferred when instigating attacks. In short order, all the generals of Sangal were called together in closed conference, along with all the Island Guardians. Their meeting sought to determine whether or not Surina's information was trustworthy. The generals doubted that one of the Rassharou would bring them such a report—and a Rassharou girl, at that, with no real knowledge or experience of war. What reason would she have to warn them? How had she come to learn of the Talsh battle plan? They felt certain that her information must be some kind of trap. There were too many unanswered questions. The generals decided unanimously that they would have to bring Surina to the palace and pose their questions directly to her.

And so, on her second night in the capital, Surina was led secretly to the palace to meet with Sangal's generals. She still had a fever, so from her perspective the palace, the generals, and everything surrounding her seemed like a vividly intense dream brought on by her sickness.

When she took her first step into the open hall where the generals awaited her, she felt crushed by the oppressive hugeness of the space. The hall reminded her of the endless caves she'd wandered through on on Zuai island.

The smooth white walls were polished to a shine like the inside of a seashell. Rich tapestries made with gold and silver thread hung from the walls. Intricate carvings decorated huge columns that reached the ceiling. Lamps hung from each column, bathing the entire space in a soft light.

When she'd been summoned to the palace, Rakora's wife had given Surina a set of splendid new clothes to wear. She'd been overjoyed to receive such a gift, but she still felt like she was clad in her old rags. The space was too grand and majestic for her.

A female attendant took her arm and led her to the center of the space where a desk was set up. The attendant pulled out a chair for her; she sat down. She wanted to bow in thanks, but that was impossible while she was sitting; the desk was directly in front of her. With all eyes in the room turning toward her, Surina felt like she was floating above her body, viewing everything from the outside.

A tall and very beautiful woman approached Surina and smiled. "Are you Surina?"

"Yes, lady," she said. Her voice echoed in her ears.

The woman nodded. "I am Princess Karina. Behind me, in this room, you see the assembled generals of Sangal." The three men behind her nodded to Surina. Karina bowed to her and thanked her for bringing her message to the capital, at which point Surina became absolutely convinced that this whole experience was a dream and froze in her seat.

Princess Karina asked her questions in a kind and encouraging tone. Surina did her best to answer the questions calmly, with all the details she knew. The generals spread a wide length of cloth on the floor that contained a map of the Yaltash ocean as Surina spoke, but Surina did not know what it was. She had never read a map before, and it all looked like strange and foreign symbols to her.

When the generals asked her to trace the route that the Talsh empire intended to take to the capital, she was at a loss. She had never used maps to navigate, instead relying on her knowledge of currents

and the placement of the islands she knew, as well as the directional bearings provided by the sun and stars. She couldn't translate all that knowledge to a two-dimensional piece of cloth.

Unsure of what to do, Surina began drawing a map on her hand, in the style of the Rassharou people. She called out the placement of the currents and the names of islands as if she was reciting a poem. The generals hurriedly marked the locations that Surina indicated on their own map, but there were several currents and constellations she mentioned that they'd never heard of before. "At the start of the Afalo current, the wind generally blows from the north during this season. The Rassharou and all the fishermen ride this current, and wind up here," she said, pointing to a place on her hand and pausing before providing more clarification.

The generals took Surina's precise directions and locations and applied them painstakingly to their own map. As the picture of the invasion plan emerged, the generals became convinced that Surina wasn't lying. The route made too much sense. They could see how an enemy could exploit it.

"This is the first time I've ever seen one of the Rassharou share what they know of the ocean," one of the generals said, clearly impressed.

Princess Karina took Surina's hand and squeezed it. "You have done the kingdom of Sangal a great service, and you will always be welcome here among us. Is there anything that you desire as a reward?"

Karina's hand was cold where it clasped hers. Surina looked up at her and swallowed. "I...can't really think of anything right now. I'd love to see my family again, but..."

Princess Karina nodded. "I understand. I shall consider what can be done for your family."

Surina was given a large sum of money. After that, an attendant and a guard guided her through the labyrinthine halls of the palace to the back gate. A hall lined with columns opened out into a wide courtyard garden. The moon had risen. Surina looked up at it and inhaled the

night air, sweet with the scent of blooming white sala flowers. The flowers were bright white; they shone like a sheet of twinkling stars in the light of the moon.

The sound of musicians playing flutes and string instruments passed over Surina like a wave. Singing voices and laughter commingled with the music. She heard people clapping and stomping with the beat of the music, exactly as they would at a festival on one of the islands. It was a rich tapestry of sound, reminding her of the wall hangings that she'd seen in the huge hall with the generals that had been fringed with silver and gold.

The moon rose directly overhead as she walked. She heard birds flapping their wings; when she looked up, goosebumps rose along her spine. She blinked and was suddenly surrounded by the bright blue waves of the Other Sea. A shadow floated across her face. When Surina tracked it, she saw a human figure floating on the surface of the bright blue water above her.

It was Eshana.

"Eshana!"

She was crying. She either couldn't or didn't hear Surina call out to her. She seemed not to hear anything at all. Surina wanted to reach out and hug her as she had so many times before. The desire made Eshana's feelings flow into her as if they were carried by the water: she could feel Eshana's sadness and pain as sharply as if it were her own.

I want to go home... I can't go home... Save me!

Surina felt exactly as if she were Eshana for a moment, but then she lost the feeling. Eshana's soul withdrew as if it was attached to a string reeling her in—toward the palace. Surina lost sight of her.

Eshana's soul had gone to the palace, in the same direction that the music was coming from. She had been drawn there like a moth to a flame.

Surina felt Eshana's thoughts echo in her mind. Her heart hurt. She wanted to save her.

"Are you all right, miss?" the attendant guiding her asked.

Surina pointed in the direction of the music. The woman smiled at her.

"Ah, that's the music that opens a feast for our foreign guests that are visiting the capital. Isn't it lovely?" she said with a dreamy smile.

Surina took in the woman's explanation, then asked, "Is the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita there, too?"

The woman's smile vanished. "Yes. Though if I'm honest, that particular guest frightens me a little."

"Frightens you how?"

The attendant and guard accompanying Surina looked at one another at the same time. "There's a rumor in the palace," the attendant said. "I heard it from a girl named Riona, but she claims that it's the same for everyone that serves the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita. They'll be standing right next to her and suddenly fall asleep. When they wake up, they're in an entirely different room, with no memory of how they got there."

"I heard the same thing from my friend Talon," the guard said. "He's one of her guards. Sometimes he completely forgets what he did all day. I just laugh and tease him for sleeping all day, but maybe he’s being serious?"

Surina walked between them, listening to their conversation. She never took her eyes off the banquet hall where the music was coming from. Eshana was there. So was her soul. But then why...

She remembered Eshana's soul dancing among the lights of the Other Sea. There must be a reason why she couldn't become whole. She remembered Eshana's soul being yanked back and away from her in the garden, her movements unnatural and stilted, and she grieved.

Part Three

Chapter 1 - Storm Clouds Gather

Chagum was dead tired at the end of another night of feasting. He walked through the annex of the main dining hall and navigated back to his rooms. Shuga followed fast at his heels, along with a train of servants and guards.

The moon shone huge and round in the sky. Wind stirred the leaves of the trees in the courtyard gardens, then died down. The gardens were eerily silent as he passed them by. He scented water in the air and muttered, "Will it rain?"

He looked up. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but the smell of water lingered. Chagum felt like someone had poured it over him. He thought he heard someone cry out, but it was only the voice of a songbird, melancholy and sad. Throbbing pain shot from his forehead to the rest of his body; goosebumps prickled his skin. The smell of water became overwhelming; he tried to call out for help, but no sound came out.

And then Chagum saw it: bright, beautiful blue water superimposed over the flowers in the courtyard's garden. In the water, he saw a young girl dancing. Her eyes were open wide. The expression in them was hopeless; she looked like a lost child. A thread of white light emerged from her forehead, extending in the direction of the palace, where Chagum had just been. The overpowering scent of water came from this thread. As Chagum watched, the thread was yanked away from her forehead in a recoiling motion; a few moments later, it returned to her head, firmly attached. This disturbing scene played out over and over again.

When Chagum tried to trace the light of the girl's Soul Thread to its source, he smelled something rancid burning and nearly threw up. He tore his eyes from the Soul Thread with a gasp.

He looked into the girl's eyes and received a shock as if he'd been struck by lightning.

Her soul was trapped between the worlds—unable to go to Nayugu, and unable to return to Sagu. Her soul was being yanked between the two worlds. Chagum didn't know what would happen to her if she remained in that state, but his heart ached just thinking about it.

“Your Majesty?” Shuga's voice echoed in his ears. Chagum's vision of the world between worlds swirled into a spiral that moved farther and farther away from him until it vanished completely.

“You're dead on your feet,” Shuga said. “Are you all right?”

Chagum composed himself quickly. His head hurt horridly; a buzzing sound lingered in his ears. The source of the irritation seemed to be coming from behind him. Chagum gritted his teeth and stood up straight. The Crown Prince of New Yogo was not allowed to collapse. He would become the sacred soul of his nation one day; if he collapsed now, his attendants would take it as an ill omen and shrink back from him in fear.

Chagum took a deep breath, closed his eyes and opened them again. He plastered on a fake smile and turned to face his servants and guards. “I'm perfectly fine,” he said. “Please ease your minds.”

His face was covered in thin white cloth, so his smile was just barely visible. He felt a wave of relief pass over his people as he reassured them.

Chagum started walking again. Next to him, Shuga whispered, “Your Majesty? Are you really all right?”

Chagum nodded, but his thoughts were spiraling out of control. He felt himself trembling slightly. “Shuga, the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita is in the courtyard we passed. Just now.”

Shuga jerked his head over his shoulder to look.

Chagum shook his head. “Not the girl herself. I saw her soul.” Chagum fixed his eyes straight ahead and kept walking. “I think she was asking me to save her. It was only for a second, but it felt like I'd been hit by lightning, and suddenly I could understand what she wanted. She wants to go home. She wants to be rescued. I got the sense that she's not able to return to her body... She was crying.”

Shuga processed Chagum's revelations in blank silence.

“I also think I smelled dolga root,” Chagum said. “It was awful.” He looked at Shuga with hooded eyes and said in an agitated tone, “That girl's body is going to be thrown into the ocean at the Soul Return Ceremony two nights from now.”

“Yes. But, Your Majesty—”

“Don't say it, Shuga. I know.” Chagum frowned deeply and stared into the air in front of him as if it were a void.

“I won't say anything.”

“There has to be a way to save her,” Chagum said. *Why would I be able to hear her call for help if there was nothing I could do?* Chagum sucked in another breath. His jaw hurt from grinding his teeth. He returned to his rooms, unable to shake Eshana from his thoughts. He decided to talk to Saluna.

Saluna emerged from hiding after verifying that it was safe. “Your Highness, you must hear this.” Her face was pale and pinched. She extended a hand to him, and Chagum took it. He was not accustomed to touching people, so the sensation was something of a shock.

“I think we've figured out who's behind this plot.” Saluna spoke animatedly, relaying to Chagum everything that she and Tarsan had discussed regarding Yogo and Talsh. Chagum, Shuga and Tarsan stood still and listened quietly, without interruption.

As he listened, Chagum felt himself getting colder. Out the window in the far distance, dark clouds gathered over the surface of the ocean. Chagum had a premonition that these dark clouds were coming to swallow up New Yogo as well as Sangal. Until now, Chagum's impression of the old kingdom of Yogo had been vague and impersonal: he knew that New Yogo's gods came from there and that his ancestors had fled the kingdom during the time of a terrible war. Even when he'd learned about Talsh conquering Yogo, the knowledge had not been impactful: it had been a passage written in a history book.

But now, in this nation of many islands, he'd seen the fingers of the old Yogo kingdom manipulating events, with the shadow of the Talsh empire behind them. Those fingers were pointing north, to his own homeland. His heart faltered. If Sangal fell, it would become Talsh's bridge to the north. New Yogo would be attacked.

Chagum had never known war. He couldn't even imagine it. But if things kept going as they were, he would become intimately familiar

with it as a matter of necessity. If New Yogo went to war, what would he do? What would be the best course of action to take?

He had no desire to become the pure soul of his nation like the current Mikado. From the bottom of his soul, he considered such an aspiration to be utterly worthless. He had only ever considered his rank as the Crown Prince to be a cold metal chain that separated him from the warmth and affection of ordinary people. The chain moved with him whenever he took a step, and from each link, hanging heavily, were all the lives of the people of New Yogo.

Even one small stumble had terrified his guards and servants. They revered him as if he were some kind of god or sage, but they were sorely mistaken. Their misconceptions bound Chagum to a life he wasn't suited to and didn't want. He thought of all of the people he would rule: a whole sea of them, nameless, faceless...and the shadow of the terrifying Talsh empire passing over their heads.

Chagum looked at Saluna. “I could never have anticipated any of this, but I do believe that you're right. I feel it. We can't just leave this alone. I'd like to strike a blow in Sangal's defense, but I'm foreign and ignorant of the proper way to do things, and if I meddle too much I'd be suspected of interfering for selfish or nefarious ends. I don't know how to share what you've learned with the the rest of the royal family in a way that would keep us all safe.”

He frowned, then asked, “What about Princess Karina? Can she be trusted?”

Saluna blinked. “She is...very intelligent. Very. And the other women in the palace would follow her, if we could convince her. She does not easily display her true emotions or intentions, but...I think she might believe me.”

Chagum looked into Saluna's eyes.

“Have you...spoken to her?” Saluna asked.

Karina had asked Chagum to abandon Tarsan and save Saluna. It was good to hear that she would likely believe Saluna, but there was a significant chance that she wouldn't. And if she heard them out and

didn't believe them, Tarsan would be executed as his sentence demanded.

Saluna seemed to have made up her mind, but then she hesitated.

Tarsan put his hand on Saluna's shoulder. “Saluna. Don't sacrifice the safety of all of Sangal for my personal safety. I'm not worth it.”

Saluna glanced up at him, then faced Chagum and nodded decisively. “I will arrange a meeting with Karina as swiftly as possible.”

“Is there any way you can meet her without being seen?”

Saluna's face clouded over. “I can get to the inner courtyard without being seen, but after that...”

Chagum looked to Shuga. “What do you think?”

Shuga offered him a tight smile. “I think that we have no viable options except to invite Princess Karina to come here.”

Chagum's face relaxed in an expression of relief. He'd been prepared for Shuga to oppose him on this. His forehead crinkled in a frown. “But there's also something else we have to do.”

“Yes. I expect that after we meet with Princess Karina, we'll all understand this situation a lot more clearly. Then we must send a messenger to New Yogo in secret, telling them to be watchful over events in the south.”

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When Princess Karina greeted Chagum that day, he expressed a desire to offer thanks for her previous consideration by inviting her to visit him. Karina immediately understood the invitation for what it was. When she made her visit soon afterward, Saluna told her all about the plot that she, Tarsan and Chagum had uncovered, and Karina did not seem in the least bit surprised by any of it—except for one thing.

“Did you say a magic weaver? A magic weaver from Yogo placed a curse on Tarsan?” Karina addressed these questions to Shuga.

“We can't verify that they did come from Yogo,” Shuga said. “But I guarantee that the magic weaver cursed Prince Tarsan. I saw it with my own eyes.”

As she looked at Shuga, the dull gleam of casual interest in her eyes intensified to a steady flame hungry for knowledge. She faced Saluna. “You know that Adol consults a magic weaver matching this description.”

Saluna nodded, but did not raise her eyes. She was afraid to look directly at her sister.

Karina remained silent for a few moments, then blinked. “But you have no direct evidence to back up this information. You have made a plausible guess based on circumstantial evidence; that is all...though some of what you've said supports what I've observed myself.” She shook her head a little.

“My husband is easily led. I've long suspected that he's been up to something, but if he really did set up Tarsan to kill Karnan, I'll never forgive him.”

Karina grumbled to herself: *You idiot. I don't know what you were promised, but all you've become is a Talsh stooge. I don't even understand what you could have hoped to achieve.* Karina shook her head to clear her thoughts.

“If your guess is correct—and it is indeed plausible—then we are all in danger. We must be cautious. If the Talsh are behind all this, then they will never have a better opportunity to seize power. If Lord Shuga is correct, and this magic weaver is able to observe our actions in some way, they may be able to strike at us before we can even act.”

“If I ruled the Talsh empire,” Chagum said, “I wouldn't wait for this plot against the royal family to succeed. I'd send my armies to Sangal now, as a contingency if nothing else. Has there been any news from the islands to the south?”

Karina's eyes shone with admiration. “I am impressed, Your Majesty. It is as you say. Talsh forces have been spotted mustering at our

southern border. We have obtained detailed information regarding their invasion plan."

Everyone except Karina gasped at this revelation.

"What did you say?" Saluna asked. "Karina, how can you be so calm about something like that?"

Karina shifted her gaze to Saluna briefly before focusing back on Chagum. "Sangal is already preparing for war," she said. "Thanks to the detailed report we have received, we are forewarned. Every Island Guardian will be sent back to their islands and ordered to mobilize. If there are any traitors among the Island Guardians, they must be rooted out and eliminated to prevent Sangal from collapsing from within."

Karina huffed out a breath. "The islands of the Sagan sea are most vulnerable to attack. The Talsh will find it difficult to take all of Sangal in one sweep—the territory is too vast and disconnected. But the islands of the Sagan sea border their own empire, and the Talsh are already moving. By my estimation, the Talsh will arrive at the capital in three days. I have given up on the Sagan islands as lost."

Chagum looked up at Karina in surprise. He thought it strange that this beautiful and powerful woman could speak of the islands of her own nation like stones skipped over water—she didn't care if they sank beneath the waves.

"I see," Shuga said. "So that's how things are."

Chagum glanced over at Shuga, looking puzzled.

"The Sagan islands will fall to conquest, giving the rest of Sangal time to prepare and to fortify itself," Shuga said. "That time could be the difference between victory and defeat. The Talsh are powerful, but they are not, by and large, a seafaring people. They have never met the Sangal navy in combat up until now. No matter the outcome of that battle, the Talsh side would inevitably sustain heavy losses. This would weaken the Talsh considerably, maybe even enough for some of the independent nations they've conquered to revolt."

Shuga spoke continuously without stopping for air, then finally fell silent. He had narrowly avoided saying the part that Chagum was

probably thinking about: If Sangal had three days to prepare, why not at least try to protect the Sagan islands as well? But this was not a tactful question, and Shuga did not ask it.

Karina smiled at him. “Exactly as you say.”

Shuga bowed his head.

Tarsan sighed. “But why would any Island Guardians even support Talsh in the first place? I don't understand it. Why would they betray us? Wouldn't that be like betraying themselves?”

Karina looked straight at Tarsan. She thought he seemed impossibly young and naive. “The hermit crab discards its shell when it grows too large for it, and seeks another. I suspect something of the sort is happening with the Island Guardians.

“I also suspect that the Talsh desire to conquer Sangal without much bloodshed. They've likely enticed the Island Guardians with honeyed words and impossible promises. No one knows the full extent of the wealth of the southern continent. They undoubtedly believe that they can become richer under Talsh rule than they are currently. And if you consider it from the Talsh perspective, if the Island Guardians betray the royal family, there would be no need to conquer Sangal at all. The Island Guardians would deliver it to them on a plate—and the Talsh would gain vast wealth and territory without weakening itself in the least.”

Karina fixed her gaze on Chagum and Shuga. “The women of the royal family marry Island Guardians in order to prevent such treason. But Sangal has been at peace for generations, and we have relaxed our vigilance.”

Chagum nodded shallowly, but could not craft a suitable response. The situation was too dire for ordinary words. The idea of the Island Guardians being like hermit crabs discarding the shells that they had considered home for so long surprised him greatly. He hadn't thought of Sangal's people as being motivated purely by greed. Could they really change their allegiance as easily as they changed clothes?

If that's so, the Sangal kingdom is a lot more vulnerable than I thought.

The islands of Sangal were separated from one another, sometimes by vast stretches of ocean. In the end, despite all attempts at unification, geographical isolation had evolved into true independent isolation, with each Island Guardian only looking out for their territory's own best interests.

The capital of Sangal was beautiful. The Island Guardians' ties to the royal family were strong. But without the royal family itself to unite them, the Island Guardians would all be governing independent territories. In many ways, they already were—except that they had to give a share of their wealth to the royal family. They did not consider themselves as a shield protecting the north from the warlike south, and their lack of consideration on that score made Chagum deeply nervous.

Karina felt as if her heart was surrounded by a ring of cold and bitter loneliness. She disciplined herself, trying to make herself as still as the surface of a becalmed sea. She still wasn't convinced of Saluna's conclusion that the Yogo magic weaver was in league with the Island Guardians. If there was such a neat line between Tarsan's attack on Karnan and the movements of the Talsh navy, then Sangal was definitely in more trouble than she'd anticipated.

But so far, there was little evidence that many of the Island Guardians had joined the Talsh. That could be a bright spot of good news, though it was obvious that a sophisticated and complex Talsh conspiracy existed. If Sangal could keep the Island Guardians on their side, the Talsh would be forced to fight the Sangal navy. That battle wouldn't go well for the Talsh, and they clearly didn't want an all-out war. Sangal didn't, either. There might still be a path to peace.

If the Island Guardians had switched sides already, Karina could only applaud the Talsh empire's skill as a negotiator. She could imagine how they could have done it: making promises laced with threats. The Talsh were in a position to threaten Sangal with both military and economic defeat if they were rejected or opposed. Karina realized that

the Talsh were entirely capable of backing the Island Guardians into a corner and pressuring them until they had no choice.

Maybe I'm trying to figure all of this out in the wrong order. I need to find out if the Island Guardians are loyal or not first. Every hope we have depends on them. I must root out the traitors and wreak swift and terrible justice upon them. And then...

Well, ensuring the future loyalty of the new Island Guardians was a problem for the future.

Adol's face rose up in her mind's eye. Her chest felt tight. She smiled bitterly at Chagum. “Your Majesty, the future survival of Sangal as a nation is in our hands. I humbly request your assistance.” As she spoke, Karina rose from her seat and gestured to her attendants, who were waiting for her in the hall. She turned to leave, but Tarsan called her back.

“Karina.”

Karina turned to face him.

“Do you believe us?” Tarsan asked. “Do you believe that I was cursed, at least?”

Karina stared straight at him. “Yes. But it doesn't really matter what I believe. That's not the problem. The problem is whether or not you'll be believed by others—especially the King.”

Tarsan frowned deeply. “So there is nothing I can do to counter the false accusations against me?”

“First, we must expose the traitorous actions of any Island Guardians,” Karina said. “If we can get the traitors to talk, or return to our side, we may gain testimony that concerns Adol's involvement with the magic weaver. Then we may be able to clear your name.” Karina sighed. “I am sorry about Eshana. I understand how you must feel about her, but you must understand that such feelings are a weakness that can be exploited. That's your only crime—you were taken advantage of.”

Tarsan felt like Karina had ripped his heart out.

Chagum's eyes flicked to Karina. Now might be the best time to persuade her not to throw Eshana from the cliffs at the Soul Return Ceremony.

“Princess Karina,” he said, “about Eshana...” Chagum felt Shuga's eyes on him, but he ignored Shuga. “If her soul returns to her body before the night of the ceremony, she won't be given to the sea. Isn't that right?”

Karina frowned at Chagum in confusion. Her eyebrows knitted together. “Yes.”

“Princess Karina,” Chagum said, “what I have to say may seem unbelievable, but I know that Eshana's soul is here, in the palace.”

Karina's frown grew deeper. Chagum tried once more to explain. When he finished telling her what he had seen in the courtyard garden, everyone remained silent for a few moments. It took time to make the connections between the Talsh plot they had been speaking of and the implications of Eshana's soul being at the palace, but not in her body.

After a while, Karina said, “Crown Prince Chagum, I believe you as well.”

Tarsan, who had been listening with bated breath, relaxed all at once. But Karina wasn't finished speaking.

“Prince Chagum, do you know how to return Eshana's soul to her body?”

Chagum blinked. “Uh, I don't know the exact method. But if we can drive the magic weaver's soul from her body, I'm sure her own would be able to return.”

“Would you and Lord Shuga be capable of doing such a thing? Do you truly believe Eshana's soul would return if the magic weaver was driven off?”

Chagum and Shuga exchanged glances. Neither one of them wanted to lie.

“We can try,” Chagum said. “But we don't know for absolute certain that she'll return. And we only have until tomorrow night to make the

attempt. I wish we had more time."

Karina fixed Chagum with a stern expression. "I am sorry to say this, but I suspect that your efforts will be unsuccessful. If this magic weaver truly does control this girl's body, he will attempt to retain control of it at all costs, to cover his own tracks and prevent any evidence of a Talsh conspiracy from coming to light. If the magic weaver doesn't find some way to kill her, his part in this whole affair will be exposed. The situation is also convenient for him—he can use our own myths and legends to ensure that she's given to the sea."

Karina's cold and uncompromising eyes reminded Chagum strongly of the Mikado's. They were the same eyes his father had cast on him when he had ordered his assassination to protect the illusion of his own pure reputation.

Suppressing rage, Chagum stared back at Karina. The light in his own eyes was bright and forbidding. "Eshana is a very young child. She is not a tool to be used by other people. Her life belongs to no one but herself."

Karina shook her head slightly and said frankly, "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but you are mistaken. Right now she is potentially an incredibly dangerous tool." She bowed her head gracefully and once again moved to withdraw from the room.

Tarsan called her back again. "Karina, please wait." His hands were balled into fists. "Your words wound me. You think me weak. But you don't seem to understand that it's not just Eshana I care for. I care for everyone on Kalsh—and for all the people of Sangal's islands. I believe in and love all of Sangal's people. Uncle Yunan did, too.

"If uncle Yunan were still alive, I think he would have said the same thing to you as Crown Prince Chagum. I could never use someone I cared about as a tool. All of my personal guards and servants know that. We are Yaltash Shuri—brothers of the sea. That's a bond as strong as family."

Karina looked skeptical. Tarsan's face went bright red from intensity; his voice increased in volume as he spoke. "Even if Adol has

betrayed us, do you really think his soldiers would obey him? They are brothers of the sea, as I am. They would listen to me over him. I'm certain that they still believe in me. Please, Karina, let me talk to them!"

Karina tilted her head and sighed. "Tarsan. You are...hopelessly immature." She bowed to Chagum once more, then left the room.

Tarsan stared at her as she left. He was trembling violently. When she was out of sight, he turned to Saluna. "I'm...immature? What did she mean by that?"

"That in order to expose treachery, you must be capable of treachery yourself. I think."

Tarsan nodded in understanding, but his expression displayed his disgust at the idea. "She won't even give Adol's soldiers a chance to help us. She's given up on them. She may as well be helping the Talsh. Does she intend to condemn the soldiers to teach me a lesson?"

Tarsan met Chagum's eyes. He looked like he was about to throw up. "Is it *immature* to believe that we'll need the help of the army to save Sangal?"

Chagum didn't have a good answer for him. Tarsan stared at him, and he stared back.

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Chagum wrote a letter to the Mikado and passed it into the keeping of three of the guards that had accompanied him to Sangal. Karina had arranged to dress these guards in the colors and livery of the royal palace so that they could leave through the messengers' gate without arousing suspicion. Chagum wondered how long the message would take to reach New Yogo. The message contained explosive information; what happened after the Mikado received it was anyone's guess.

Chagum's impatience moved in him like a living thing. Aside from sending off the letter, there was nothing he could do except wait. He stretched out on the floor of his room and tried to rest.

He'd loaned his bedding to Tarsan and Saluna so that they might get a decent night's sleep. They were still concealed in his closet. A single salu lamp cast a dim corona of illumination from the corner of his room. Chagum laid awake in the half-dark and considered the events of the day.

Karina would do anything to protect Sangal, even if it meant using people to achieve her own ends. Tarsan refused to give up on Sangal's soldiers. And then there was Eshana—just a little girl. In the grand scheme of things, she had no more agency than a grain of sand. If Chagum was a good statesman and politician, he probably would think of her that way: lacking in agency and choices, and therefore unimportant.

But he couldn't think of her that way even if he tried. She was probably still in the courtyard, crying and floating in the waters of Nayugu, begging to go home. The muscles of his back stiffened as he stared up into the gloom.

If I were a spirit, could I save her?

Chagum's soul had left his body and traveled to another world before. Tanda, an apprentice magic weaver, had saved him by teaching him how to return to his body. Tanda had transformed him into a falcon. On strong wings, he had made his way swiftly in a straight line back to his body. As he thought about that time, he remembered what Tanda had told him when he'd found him in the other world.

Changing your shape changes the capabilities of your soul. It takes power, but it also frees you from limitations. He could hear Tanda's voice, as close as if he were speaking in his ear. *A soul's shape represents certain traits and abilities. In human shape, you can run and jump and do all the same things a human can. And as a bird, you can fly.*

The power to fly as a soul comes from a strong desire to live. It is the desire to keep going, keep struggling, even through darkness and pain. Balsa and I understand that desire very well.

Chagum closed his eyes. He felt Nayugu calling out to him: the cry resonated through his entire body. The call provided a certain amount

of encouragement: he might be able to banish the magic weaver from Eshana's body. The magic weaver was undoubtedly very powerful, but he wouldn't be fighting the magic weaver's magic: he'd be fighting his soul. And in a battle between souls, whoever had the strongest will prevailed.

But...is it right for me to stake my life to save this girl?

The perception of him as a saint or a god was pure delusion, but he was still New Yogo's Crown Prince. By putting himself in danger, he could die, and all of New Yogo would interpret that as an evil omen. People would suffer because of him. He didn't even know how many.

But the Mikado was still young. So was Chagum: he hadn't really had time to gain much of an influence in politics yet. If he died, the son of the Third Queen, Tugum, would inherit his place, but Tugum would have no conception of what that even meant for ten years or more. He'd only just been born.

Chagum had the choice of ignoring the needs of his people and his responsibilities to follow his own feelings, or discarding his own feelings in favor of duty.

Nayugu is so far away from all of this...

Behind his closed eyelids, Chagum saw Nayugu spread out before him: a vast landscape of mountains and rivers. Nayugu was alive, just as Sagu was. Life set everything into motion and kept everything in balance. Eshana was now caught between Nayugu and Sagu, as he'd been once. Given the choice, would she prefer to be in Nayugu? Or had she been lured there deceptively by the beautiful voices of the water dwellers?

Chagum considered himself and his role as the guardian of the water spirit that had brought forth the clouds and blessings of rain upon Sagu. Was the fact that he still seemed connected to Nayugu a coincidence, or was there a reason?

I don't know. I don't know anything.

He reached up to Nayugu's endless night sky and tried to hold a star in his hand. The stars held no answers for him. The world of Nayugu

surrounded him, boundlessly vast and utterly silent.

He felt the huge weight of something like destiny upon him, but it wasn't quite destiny, or fate. The worlds of Nayugu and Sagu revolved around one another. Some points of intersection were like knots that bound Sagu and Nayugu together, or like blood vessels that passed resources back and forth. Chagum thought of people like Eshana and himself as these knots, these points of connection. But no matter what Chagum thought—and no matter how much he valued Eshana—the rest of the world would not be moved by his desire to save one girl's life at the potential expense of his own.

By the rest of the world's standards, it would be perfectly reasonable for Chagum to allow Eshana to be sacrificed in order to better extricate himself from intricate foreign plots and the threat of war. That's what a politician would do.

I wonder why people are like this? Why are my choices like this?

Chagum could still hear Eshana crying. The sound pierced his heart. He spent the entire night listening to it, wide awake, and did not answer the call from Nayugu to go and save her.

Chapter 2 - Attack and Defense

Near the palace, there was a grand mansion where men of high rank could partake in good food and expensive wine. It usually only opened in the evenings, but it had been ordered to open at noon that day by Sangal's Island Guardians. A special meeting chamber was prepared for them inside.

The faces of the Island Guardians appeared pinched and nervous. That morning, on orders from the King, their soldiers had been sent back to their islands to prepare for an impending attack. The Island Guardians' emergency meeting had been convened to address these recent alarming events.

Usually, their wives would accompany them to such a meeting, but today they were holding their own emergency meeting in the Flower Pavilion, so the Island Guardians had seized this chance to meet in secret. Dishes containing slices of fresh fish, sweet accal fruit, and tender beef (very rare on the islands) were spread upon the table, but none of the Island Guardians ate. Although it was only just past noon, all the men were drinking.

“The royal family suspects us. Our soldiers have been sent away.”

“You're reading too much into that. It's only natural for the King to fortify the islands when he hears about a possible attack.”

Adol listened to the conversations of the other Island Guardians in silence, then set down his wine glass. “What's most important now is not what the royal family thinks, but what *we* think.”

The Island Guardians' chatter fell silent like a pot of boiling water suddenly removed from a flame. The nervous atmosphere in the room intensified. Some of the Island Guardians had already decided to join the Talsh. Some still wavered, unsure of what would serve their interests best. It was the eleventh hour, and betraying a king was no simple matter. Many of the Island Guardians had come to this meeting to gather the courage required for such a deed.

“We don't have anything to worry about,” a man with red-rimmed eyes said. He had many islands under his control, Rasu chief among them.

“We are caught in the flow of a current,” another man said hoarsely. He was not the sort of man to mince words, and he considered joining the Talsh in this situation an inevitability. “The kingdom of Sangal is being sucked into a whirlpool. We'd do best to ride the current away from the whirlpool, or we too may wind up at the bottom of the sea.”

Some among the Island Guardians deeply loved their wives, but their feelings had soured somewhat when they'd realized how much their wives prioritized the royal family's interests ahead of their own. They were connected to Sangal's royalty by familial bonds, but their sons would not necessarily succeed them, nor would they inherit any kind of high social rank. The history of the Sangal kingdom was short, and the current King had been amply blessed with children. The Island Guardians felt that having their children excluded from the same privileges the royal children enjoyed was deeply unfair.

“We're being watched by the Talsh even now,” Adol said in a hushed tone. “By the time the three-day term of Prince Tarsan's sentence has elapsed, we must kill the King and Prince Karnan to prove our loyalty. With Prince Tarsan fled to whereabouts unknown, we have no reason at all to wait. What should we do?”

The men looked at one another in silence for a moment. Then the Island Guardian from Rasu placed his glass upon the table with a heavy thud. “The fact that Prince Tarsan ran away doesn't change his guilt any,” he said, cutting through the room's tension with a light and easy tone. “He's as good as dead. Forget about him. We need to decide on a course of action before our wives figure out what we're doing.”

The Island Guardian from Shan island nodded his head. “We already know what the outcome will be. Our main difficulty will be in getting around the King's and Prince Karnan's guards so that we can kill them. Prince Karnan is still recovering from his grave injury, so his guards are on high alert. Getting to the King will be even more difficult. We must also consider which would be best to kill first. Their bodyguards are strong. By killing one, we'll effectively be doubling the guard on the other.”

The Island Guardians sat in contemplative silence for a while. Adol shifted his gaze to each of them in turn, then said, “I have an idea. Would you like to hear it? Or has anyone else come up with something?”

The Island Guardians looked bitterly at Adol in silence. Adol chuckled. “All right. But if my plan works, I expect you all to give me the proper respect for it.”

Rasu's Island Guardian snorted. “Respect? What do you mean?”

Adol stared at Rasu's Island Guardian. “I want you to promise that you will treat me as your leader. I want the right to negotiate directly with the Talsh as our representative.”

The men in the room talked over each other at this demand. Adol pitched his voice to cut through the din. “Assassinating the King is extremely dangerous. That's what I'm proposing. I'll do it for you, all of it. It's only reasonable to grant the man that takes the greatest risk the greatest reward.”

The men exchanged glances. The Island Guardian from Rasu said, “All right. Let's hear this plan. If it seems feasible—and if it succeeds—we'll give you the respect you've asked for.”

Adol spread a large sheet of paper out on the table. “I want everyone's name and drop of their blood on this contract to seal the deal.”

The Island Guardians crowded in to read what was written on the paper. It was a pledge of loyalty to the Talsh empire that also established Adol as their leader. The Island Guardians felt that Adol had been one step ahead of them this whole time and grew restless.

Rasu's Island Guardian glared at Adol. “I should've guessed you'd be prepared for this. I hope your plan is as good as you seem to think it is.”

Stung by his sarcasm, Adol leaned over the table. In an ingratiating tone, he said, “We'll assassinate the King and Prince Karnan at the same time. For Karnan, I'm thinking of using all the people that are praying for him and sending well-wishes... Let me make the necessary preparations, and I'll fill you in on all the details later.

“As for the King, we'll wait until he's unprotected. Tomorrow night, at the Soul Return Ceremony of the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita, he will have a light guard. The ceremony is sacred. The only people permitted at the Soul Return Ceremony are the King, his bodyguards, the Island Guardians, a small number of priests, and the girl herself.”

“Don't bullshit us. The King may be relatively unprotected during the ceremony itself, but all of his guards will be waiting along the cliff just below. We don't have the men to break through them after we've done the deed. And if the royal family anticipates this plan, they will undoubtedly separate us from our scant remaining forces.”

Adol grinned. “But we *do* have enough men. Prince Tarsan's men were removed from his service this morning.”

Some of the Island Guardians gasped in comprehension; others nodded.

“That's right; they've been temporarily assigned to Princess Karina. Their status has also been significantly demoted. It is these demoted men that will be charged with protecting the King tomorrow night. Let's make use of them. It will be their first night of duty since being transferred. I know these men well; many of them come from Kalsh.

Many also still revere Prince Tarsan, and their demotion has made them...temperamental."

"I see. You intend to use their loyalty toward Prince Tarsan to fan flames of unrest against the King."

Adol nodded. "What kind of story should we use to rile them up? I have a few ideas."

When they finished listening to Adol, every single Island Guardian frowned deeply. "We don't have control over Prince Tarsan. We don't even know where he is. After our lie is discovered, how will you beat back the soldiers from our own door?"

"After we assassinate Prince Karnan and the King, anything can happen. Don't forget that we act as a shield for the northern continent against the Talsh. For the sake of peace, our generals will put down any revolt among common soldiers. Right now, our first priority is to ensure that both assassinations are successful."

Adol offered his fellow Island Guardians a self-satisfied smile.

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At around the same time the Island Guardians were conducting their secret meeting, Surina was bringing her recent catch of fish back to shore. She had kept her promise to Dogol, but she still wouldn't see her family anytime soon. She didn't even know if she'd get a chance to see them; she had no idea where they were. Whenever she thought about it, she nearly cried.

But her life kept going, and so did she. She spent most of her days aboard her ship, leaving at dawn to go diving for fresh fish. She gave these fish to Rakora, who allowed her to take her meals with him and his wife. As if sensing her loneliness, they also taught Surina how to help out in making wine and running the shop.

While gazing out over the surface of the sea, Surina thought about Eshana, who would be tossed into these same waves tomorrow night. *I wish I had asked to save Eshana when I had the chance...*

She remembered her meeting with Princess Karina and sighed. She'd been so scared at having to give her report again. Princess Karina had been beautiful, but in hindsight Surina was disturbed at how freely and casually Karina had touched her. She felt like Princess Karina's hands were just as capable of harming her as helping her. She and Prince Tarsan were siblings, but they couldn't be more different. Surina also got the sense that no one she had spoken to in the hall with the generals would have given her the time of day ordinarily.

I'm such an idiot. I always have the best ideas after the fact...

If only, if only. She plucked at her anxious thoughts as if she were picking lint from cloth. She couldn't stop thinking about what she could do for Eshana.

She brought the fish she'd caught back to Rakora's and began scaling and boning them. Her nose twitched at the bitter smell of someone fermenting cham in the kitchen, but even the bitterness of the fermenting wine couldn't distract her from thoughts of Eshana.

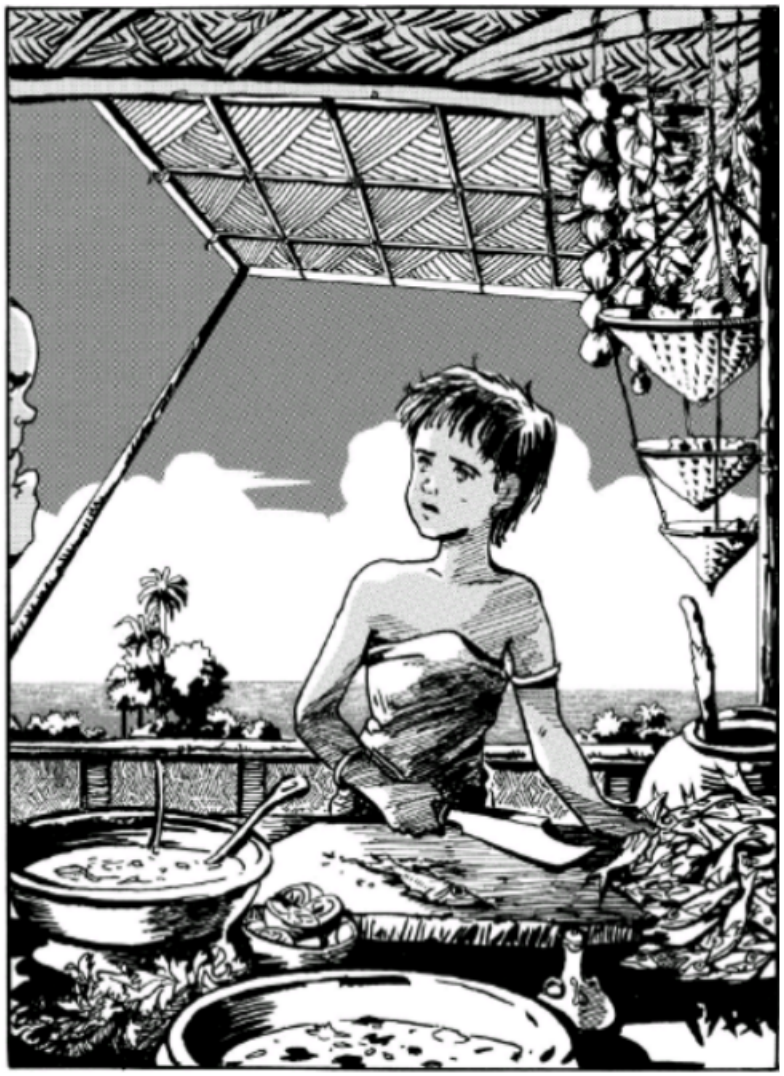
She ceased preparing her fish and looked up at Rakora. “Uncle Rakora...if Eshana's soul returns tomorrow night, what would happen?”

“What are you asking?” Rakora asked. He tasted a bit of the cham. His lips puckered in distaste. As he imagined the sight of a little girl being thrown from the cliffs above the palace, he shuddered. “Don't make me say it. Let's just pray that the worst doesn't happen.”

“Hosorou cape isn't all that high,” Surina said. “Kids that fall off it can usually be rescued.”

“You don't know what you're saying,” Rakora said. “They will tie the child to a stone. And they'll throw her into the sea at night, not during the day, so once she sinks it'll be impossible to find her. Give up. The more you think about it, the worse you'll feel.”

“That's terrible! To think they'd do something so awful like weigh them down...”



Surina shook all over. She'd carried Eshana in her arms when she was a baby. For her to be thrown into the dark ocean, all alone, weighed down so that she couldn't even swim...it was too much for her. She remembered Eshana's soul crying out to her in the palace garden, desperately wanting to go home, and felt like she'd been stabbed through the heart.

I want to save her.

But if Rakora was right, there was no way to save her after she'd been tossed into the waves. She wouldn't be able to see anything at all, sunk beneath the surface of the water in the dark. As she envisioned it all in her mind, she gasped.

Surina had an idea.

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A single night remained until the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita would be given to the sea in the Soul Return Ceremony. As thanks for the previous day's invitation, Princess Karina sent a gift of beautiful flowers in a box to Chagum's room after breakfast. Saluna opened the box carefully and rummaged through its contents.

“There's probably a message,” she said.

Saluna's guess proved correct: at the very bottom of the box was a letter wrapped in oiled paper.

“Go ahead and read it,” Chagum said.

Saluna unwrapped the letter and opened it. “Crown Prince Chagum. I offer my sincere thanks for your gracious invitation...”

Karina's letter was brief. She intended to expose the Island Guardians' role in the Talsh plot tonight. She had assigned her own personal guards to keep watch over the King, but Prince Karnan lacked any kind of additional protection. She was concerned that the Island Guardians' personal guards might be compromised, so she requested the use of Chagum's personal guards to protect him. She hoped that Chagum would agree to this request, given Sangal's long history of defending the nation of New Yogo, which had not been invaded or attacked for over a hundred years. She reaffirmed Sangal's solemn vow to always provide New Yogo with military support and committed to a free and open exchange of information.

“The letter reflects her personality, as does her request,” Saluna said.

Chagum lifted his head and looked at Shuga. “Should I accept?”

Shuga narrowed his eyes and considered. “The problem is the number of men we have. That is to say, not terribly many. And I fear we may be involving them in something very dangerous. Much depends on how strong the Island Guardians' forces are. If Princess Karina's plan

should fail...we must consider the risks. Right now, all the representatives of Sangal's allied nations are gathered in one place. If any of those representatives are killed, Sangal's diplomatic position weakens dramatically."

Chagum's eyes snapped wide open. "You're saying that this could also be the perfect time for Talsh to weaken the northern continent by killing the guests. Or killing us."

"Possibly, but that really does depend on the Island Guardians. If they're determined to crush the royal family, they may not hesitate to do more damage. But just because it's possible doesn't mean I think it will happen."

Without using so many words, Shuga was telling him that if he loaned his guards to Prince Karnan, he would be left defenseless. "I don't really think the Island Guardians would do that, though."

Saluna muttered something, then snapped her mouth shut. She wanted Chagum to lend his guards to Karnan, but she also didn't want him to do anything reckless.

Chagum's eyebrows drew together as he thought things over. Finally, he said, "We need more allies."

"Allies, Your Majesty?" Shuga asked.

Chagum's eyes glittered. "Well, we have allies here in Sangal, but I think this is a good chance for us to expand the definition of the word. We can say that we want to strengthen the relationships between our neighboring nations. Kanbal is far to the north of Sangal and Rota is to the west, but all of us are bound by hidden ties. If Sangal falls, Rota will definitely be invaded first—before New Yogo. Kanbal is farther away, which should give them more time to prepare, but if Sangal, Rota, and New Yogo fall, Kanbal is next."

Shuga felt a warmth like a excitement spread through his chest. "Think it over, Your Majesty. It will be difficult to negotiate with Rota and Kanbal. We will need a strategy."

Chagum grinned and nodded his head. His previous dull, depressed mood transformed completely after being given something to do. He

felt like he'd just been asked to draw up mock battle plans for the strategy game of racharon that he and Shuga played at the palace.

***

Before negotiating with Rota and Kanbal, they had to solidify their plans with Princess Karina, but there never seemed to be a right time to call a meeting. Chagum seized the opportunity to meet with her at lunch, though they had to do so in full view of all the other guests.

“Whenever anyone's in trouble,” Chagum said, “offering a helping hand to assist them through that trouble is both kind and generous. But alliances between nations aren't quite as simple as that. Countries can be allies even if their rulers personally hate each other. All that's really required to maintain an alliance is sufficient give-and-take from both sides.”

Karina plastered on a false smile and listened politely to Chagum, acting like he was saying something trivial or witty.

“But,” Chagum continued, “it's clear that New Yogo, Kanbal, and Rota owe Sangal a debt of gratitude for protecting them from war for so long. Right now, the situation Sangal faces can't be resolved without significant sacrifice on Sangal's part. It's only fair for Sangal's allies to ease some of their burden.”

Karina poured sweet wine into Chagum's glass and nodded. “I understand your proposal. Last night, I received full discretion from my father to handle this matter. I like this plan to call upon our allies. I will draw up a letter to each of the nations you've mentioned, affixed with the royal seal, and pass them to Your Highness. I shall rely on you.”

Chagum glanced over to the other side of the hall at the King of Kanbal, then returned his gaze to Karina.

“The King of Rota has a keen mind,” Karina said. “I am certain that he will grasp the situation immediately, and find some way to twist negotiations to his advantage. I do believe he will lend us his support, for a price. But winning over Kanbal may prove difficult.”

Chagum's eyebrows rose slightly. Karina smiled. “It would be an amazing accomplishment if the King of Kanbal could be persuaded to lend us his spearmen. I would not fear for our success if we had such skilled help. But even New Yogo and Rota's assistance should be enough. I will be very happy if you succeed. If negotiations go well, send me a box of flowers.”

Chagum drank his wine glass dry and nodded. “Understood, Princess Karina.”

Karina's eyes shone with a strong and steady light. “Tonight, after dinner, the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita will be returned to the sea in the Soul Return Ceremony. The ceremony will take place at the very tip of Hosorou cape, which is at the westernmost point of the palace grounds. It is a highly secretive ceremony, so none of our foreign guests will be permitted to attend.

“The King will be escorted by guards to the cape. The only ones permitted at the actual site of the ceremony are the King, four priests, their attendants, and the girl herself. Island Guardians are also required to attend.”

Chagum's eyes glinted in comprehension. He nodded at Karina.

“There will be a separate banquet held for our foreign guests, to serve as a farewell and to bolster Prince Karnan's health. It is believed in Sangal that song and dance are greatly therapeutic, so both of these entertainments will be given at the banquet. Karnan will also be in attendance, though he his still in his sickbed. It will be a simple enough matter for you to protect him.”

“Is it really all right to move him in his condition?”

“The bleeding has stopped, and he is awake and lucid. I have consulted with him regarding all the particulars of this plan, and we are in complete agreement. I and all the other members of the royal family will be attending the Soul Return Ceremony, but Karnan will be left in the hall with you. He has been fully briefed about everything that's going on. I believe that he'll be all right.”

Karina elegantly lifted her wine glass and took a dainty sip. “I've heard that the wind will be exceptionally strong tonight.”

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Shortly after dinner that night, it was announced that Prince Karnan would throw a banquet to celebrate his return to health and to encourage his further recovery. Adol looked at Karina and tried to suppress his anxiety. This banquet would be the culmination of all Adol's hopes. He was concerned that he may not have planned well enough for every possibility.

“Is it really all right for our esteemed brother to be moved?” he asked. “Perhaps the singers and dancers should be invited to entertain him privately.”

Karina shook her head decisively. “It is important for our guests to see how well Karnan has recovered before they go home tomorrow morning. We want to leave them with a favorable impression of us. And the physicians have given their consent to move him.”

Singing and dancing had been considered therapeutic in Sangal as a matter of long convention, so the banquet almost had the weight of a religious event. No one in the banquet hall would be permitted to carry weapons, not even guards. To wear weapons to such an event would be a sign of rudeness and disrespect. Of course, Prince Karnan's armed guards would be waiting just outside the banquet hall, watchful for any threats to his safety...but Adol believed that he'd found a flaw in the guards' preparations.

Wind, blow my way.

Adol tamped down his excitement before it could go to his head.

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Chagum made the excuse that because their time of departure for New Yogo was imminent, he wanted to exchange greetings with his country's nearest neighbors once more to wish them well on their travels. He gave first priority to the Rota kingdom. The King of Rota was forty-five years old. Chagum had heard from Karina that if he presented his case calmly, the King would certainly hear him out as if he were his own son. His face would not be an easy one to read, but Karina had told Chagum that the King of Rota's slight smile was the same as the Mikado's frozen lack of expression: a sure sign of favorability and success.

Chagum visited the King of Rota's guest quarters and handed him Princess Karina's letter. He scanned it, then passed it around to his guards and retainers. He heard their opinions, then decided quickly and decisively to ally himself with Sangal and New Yogo. The King had the reputation of understanding the hearts of his own people well; the swiftness of his decision was largely due to the unanimity of opinion among his followers on this matter.

King Yosam's physique reminded Chagum somewhat of the warriors of Kanbal, but he spoke Yogoese with an accent particular to Rota. “We've had peace in the north for a long time. Our country is small, so we have always approached disputes with a policy of strict neutrality. But we can't permit this plot to succeed. Rota and New Yogo are not large, as nations go. Let us join hands and brace against the advancing wave.”

Chagum offered the King his sincere thanks and bowed to him deeply before he left.

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The guest quarters of the Kanbal King were at the northern end of the palace in a detached villa that had been specially designed and built for guests from the cold and snowy north. It had been erected along the

coast in a place that received cold air from the deep waters of the ocean beyond Hosorou cape.

Chagum walked along a corridor as the late afternoon sunlight stretched the shadows around him. His nervous tension heightened as he moved.

I wonder what the King of Kanbal's like?

A door in front of him opened. Chagum walked into the room and identified the King of Kanbal standing in the very center of it. Four well-muscled warriors stood around him, carrying spears with shafts that were decorated with a golden ring below the tip. Compared to them, the King appeared delicate and even somewhat frail.

The King was sweating profusely. He was undoubtedly wearing his summer clothes, but clothing in Kanbal was woven or knitted out of fur, so Chagum imagined that he must be unbearably hot. Light brown hair stuck up from his forehead.

The King offered Chagum a seat. Chagum sat, then spoke to Kanbal's King exactly as he had to Rota's. As he spoke, the King became visibly nervous. His eyebrows furrowed together. When Chagum showed him Princess Karina's letter, his eyes darted around in confusion as if he was utterly lost.

The King passed the letter to the King's Spears. “What do you think?”

“I would first like to hear the opinion of Your Majesty,” the eldest of the King's Spears said in a deep voice.

Fine wrinkles appeared on the King's forehead. He fidgeted and blinked a few times, then looked at Chagum.

“Crown Prince Chagum, I understand your request. But Sangal is very distant from Kanbal. Even if the Talsh attacked, Kanbal's terrain is mainly mountainous, perilous even to those who live there. And so...” He gave Chagum a regretful smile.

“My country is very poor,” King Radalle said. “If we were wealthy like Sangal, I could easily see why the Talsh would want to conquer us

by force. But I have no desire to spill blood needlessly. There is nothing we have that the Talsh might want."

"Don't your people harvest luisha from the mountains?" Chagum asked.

The King winced at Chagum's question. Luisha was a precious blue gemstone with mysterious properties that could only be found in Kanbal. Due to its rarity, it was also very expensive.

"Luisha is not like other gems. It cannot be mined or dug out of the ground." The King tried to explain, but he started and stopped frequently, as if searching for the right words, and finally he lapsed into silence. Revealing any of luisha's secrets was forbidden.

"We do not understand this Talsh empire," the King said after a brief silence. "To us in Kanbal, it has the peculiar charm of the exotic about it. They certainly aren't our enemies." His expression hardened. "All these things being the case, I cannot add Kanbal's support to your alliance. You would be asking me to significantly weaken my own personal defenses. And if I died, there would be no further help for Sangal from Kanbal, ever."

The King's Spears exchanged glances with one another, then looked at Chagum. They looked like they wanted to say something, but they clearly agreed that their first duty was to protect the King, and in the end, they said nothing.

Chagum put his all into persuading this King that cared so much about protecting himself to also care about protecting others. "I am sorry for bringing such a petition before you in such a thoughtless way. I am young, but as I see it, when a nation sends out a cry for help, the country that extends no aid and stands independent can expect to be likewise abandoned when they are in need of assistance. Sangal, New Yogo, and Rota are extending their hands to you. Won't you accept them?"

The King of Kanbal flushed pink. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you are still only the Crown Prince of New Yogo. Are you empowered to speak as New Yogo's leader? Do you have the authority

to enforce what you say? What would happen if you proposed an alliance of friendship with Kanbal here, and your father the Mikado opposed it?"

Chagum felt his face heating up. He felt like the King had just called him an idiot. He steadied his breathing and suppressed his feelings.

"King Radalle. It is true that I am still only the Crown Prince of New Yogo. But I *will* become the Mikado. I know you see no advantage in joining forces with me now, but I beg you humbly to reconsider. For the sake of the future of all our nations, join this alliance."

The King's mouth opened and closed suddenly. He remained silent for a few moments. When he addressed Chagum again, he said, "I shall consider it." And that was all.

He knew there was no time to reconsider—Prince Karnan's banquet was tonight!—yet he still gave no clear answer.

Chagum returned to his rooms, angered at being so summarily and yet indecisively rejected. He told Shuga, Saluna and Tarsan what had happened. As he was speaking, one of his attendants knocked on the door and announced the arrival of a guest.

Saluna and Tarsan concealed themselves in the secret passage in Chagum's bedroom. They had just stepped out of sight as the door to Chagum's rooms opened.

The visitor was certainly unexpected. A man entered his rooms with brisk strides. Chagum recognized him immediately as one of the King's Spears that had stood in King Radalle's shadow. Only one. The young man bowed to Chagum.

"I am called Kahm of the Musa clan. I am the son of the clan's head, and have the honor of being one of the King's Spears. The King of Kanbal has sent me to Your Highness to deliver a message," he said in a light, bright voice. "I have come to accept your proposed alliance. Kanbal shall join New Yogo and Rota to save Sangal."

Chagum stared at Kahm in amazement.

"Thank you," Chagum breathed. "Thank you. Can I ask what changed the King's mind?"

Kahm gave him a secretive smile. “He didn't change his mind; he just needed time to consider matters thoroughly. He is not a person that decides things quickly.” Kahm's expression became grim. “I command Kanbal's military forces. The first duty of all the King's Spears is to protect the King. So you must understand that we do not ordinarily protect others, but the King has given me special dispensation. For this evening only, I am at your disposal.” His tone was as pointed and direct as Chagum would've expected from a warrior of Kanbal.

“I thank you for your aid. The strength and skill of the King's Spears is well-known even in New Yogo. Let us be allies and friends from this point forward. Please convey my sincere thanks to the King of Kanbal.”

Kahm bowed his head and withdrew.

Saluna and Tarsan heard the door close after Kahm left and emerged from hiding. “And with that, I don't think there's anything more we can do,” Saluna said.

Chagum nodded. “Everything's gone better than I expected. We still have a little time before the banquet—I finished everything before the sun set. When Shuga and I leave, these rooms will be deserted for a while. Feel free to use them as you see fit—relax, take a bath, whatever you'd like.”

Saluna grinned, but she looked tired. Chagum had brought in hot water for her and Tarsan to bathe the night before. Offering to do so again so soon was a consideration that Saluna considered a trifle excessive.

“Thank you for arranging for our clothing and our comfort,” Saluna said. “I want to be prepared for whatever happens tonight.”

Tarsan wasn't listening to her or Chagum. He stared out the window, watching the sun sink below the horizon.

Chapter 3 - The Banquet

The sun set over the ocean, streaming red and purple light through the clouds. Excited guests hurried to the banquet in the light of the setting sun. While the dignitaries from many foreign nations said their farewells before their departure the next morning, four of Prince Karnan's servants carried him into the banquet hall on a litter, causing a stir among the guests. Prince Karnan's face was very pale, but his eyes were alert, and when guests asked after his health, he reassured them with a solid wave of his left hand.

Decorations done in the style of flowers and vines hung from the hall's window frames, casting their shifting shadows along the walls. The chalk-white walls were patterned with designs painted in gold. The sweet scent of hanoral flowers, which bloomed at sunset, hung heavily in the air.

Karina took her seat casually, placing herself so that she was surrounded by the monarchs of New Yogo, Rota, and Kanbal, to make herself easy to defend in case the worst should happen. Their seats faced the wall, so they couldn't be easily attacked from behind. Karina had also prepared one additional protective measure, but Chagum prayed that she wouldn't have to use it. He'd never seen anyone die before.

The Eyes of the Nayugul Raita was also seated in the banquet hall. This was the last time she would receive the King's hospitality. The servants and priestesses that had been entrusted with her care gently worked her mouth open to pour in small quantities of fruit juice. It was strange to watch. It was the first time the assembled guests had seen her consume anything at a feast, and the special attention caused people to look more closely at the child, who had become utterly emaciated.

The magic weaver's soul was still concealed within her. When Chagum realized this, he felt as if someone had poured a bucket of cold water over him; goosebumps rose all over his entire body. In order to prevent the magic weaver from suspecting his thoughts, he avoided the gaze of the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita.

The sun completely set. As the light streaming in from the windows dimmed, the sound of a shaguram flute echoed through the hall. A singer entered through the banquet hall's great doors. She was completely naked save for the connected patterns of tattoos decorating her skin. She was accompanied by a troupe of dancers, and together they approached the banquet hall's stage.

Chagum smiled and clapped politely while holding his wine glass, but his heart was heavy. He knew that the defenses he'd organized were solid. He'd done everything he could. But there was one life he couldn't save with all his preparations: Eshana's.

“Shuga,” Chagum whispered. “I know you practice Tendo...”

Shuga looked at Chagum, puzzled.

“Can you feel it when Nayugu and our world are touching? Feel it physically?”

Shuga blinked. “Yes. Like an ocean current, I can feel when Nayugu is close—that's a strong current—or far away, which would be like a weaker one. For me, it feels like rising to a great height and looking down on my own littleness. When I'm in that state, the pressures of government and the sacrifices I've made to advance myself all seem like petty and foolish things.”

He smiled bitterly and looked at Chagum. “But I don't often have the time to indulge such feelings. I live in our world, which is full of the struggles of human beings. I do not walk the path of the Holy Sage; I'm just an ordinary Star Reader. Perhaps if I'd walked a different path, I would have no time at all to contemplate the perspective from the sky.”

Chagum covertly looked out the window while listening to Shuga's reply.

“But why would you ask me something like that?”

Chagum returned his gaze to Shuga. “I was just thinking that people are so strange. I'm largely indifferent to the world, even though it's all around me. That's what I think, anyway, but it's hard to express...”

Chagum scanned the faces of the guests in the hall. “Relationships between people, negotiations between countries...most countries seem most interested in what will make themselves rich, but there are some countries that provide assistance to others as well. I think the latter have the power to change the world.”

Chagum's eyes shone brightly. “I protected and hatched the egg of a water spirit from Nayugu that brought forth the blessings of clouds and rain. But when this role was thrust upon me, my father and the Holy Sage secretly tried to kill me. They saw nothing but the human world of Sagu. They were not able to grasp the meaning or significance of the spirit, which was from a different world than theirs. They didn't even think about me or my life.”

Chagum stared at Shuga. “You told me to live for my country. That living for New Yogo was more important than anything. And I know that's something that I have to do. But I'm wondering, Shuga...is that even true?”

Shuga felt the pressure of Chagum's gaze upon him, but he did not give him an answer.

“I was only eleven years old. If I'd been killed then, I wouldn't be here now. If there hadn't been people who cared enough to protect my tiny, solitary life over everything—over protecting the country, over money, over themselves—I wouldn't be here.”

“Your Majesty...”

Shuga's words were interrupted by the tolling of a bell from above. The sound resounded from a bell tower, once, twice...echoes lingered in the hall, reverberating in the night air. This was the bell that announced moonrise in the palace. The performers in the hall ceased their playing and dancing. Silence fell over the hall.

The King of Sangal rose languidly from his seat and said in a sonorous voice, “The moon has risen. The time has come for the Eyes of

the Nayugul Raita to return home. Honored guests, please feel free to enjoy the feast and its entertainments. Those of the royal family, our Island Guardians, and their guards and retainers must depart for Hosorou cape for the Soul Return Ceremony."

The Eyes of the Nayugul Raita stood with help from her attendants. The King's household and the Island Guardians surrounded the young girl and departed from the hall.

After a short time, the guests heard a strange sound from the window. It was like the cry of a bird, but long-held; the sound changed pitch from low to high, then faded, then sounded out once more.

Seeing the confusion on the guests' faces, one of the King's servants said, "That is the Song of Grief. It is a grievous thing for the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita to leave us."

Some of the guests, curious about the song, stood up and gathered around the window along the western wall, where it could be heard clearly.

After whispering to Karnan's guards not relax their vigilance, Chagum faced the window as well. The night air carried the faint tang of the sea. Salt stung Chagum's eyes. In the enveloping dark, a flickering light was visible in the courtyard gardens. The King's procession passed through the palace gate in a long line. Those that led the procession carried strange lamps aloft. These lamps shone brightly for a few moments, then smoked and fizzled and went out before being replaced with another bright light.

"That is susuki fire," one of the King's servants said softly. "It burns swiftly and brightly, and then fades, representing the sad and sudden passing of human life. Before they arrive at Hosorou cape, a thousand susuki fires will have burned out."

The guests sank into a melancholy mood as they contemplated the short-lived flames.

"Is Hosorou cape far from here?" Chagum asked.

"Hosorou cape connects to the very edge of the palace grounds. It would take perhaps twenty minutes to walk there from here."

The procession passed behind the shadow of a building and was no longer visible. The guests returned to their seats, including Chagum. He couldn’t get the image of the susuki fires out of his head. That procession was winding its way toward Hosorou cape in the darkness. The leaders of the procession carried flames that continually flared up and burned out. He couldn't ignore the symbolism there; the grief he felt for Eshana overwhelmed him. He closed his eyes.

He felt like was about to cry and passed his left hand over his face to conceal it. He heard a faint rustling sound coming from his sleeve. Something was lodged inside it. It was a wedge of folded paper, packed tight with Sangalese writing. Chagum stealthily removed the paper from his sleeve and hid it in his lap, where he unfolded it and began to read.

As he read, his heart beat faster; he could hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears. *Tarsan, what have you done?*

The scribbly handwriting was Tarsan's. He must have written this letter while he was concealed in Chagum's closet, then slipped it into Chagum's sleeve before he left for the banquet. He'd probably done it last night, when Saluna had taken a bath and left Tarsan alone.

Crown Prince Chagum,

Please forgive me for choosing a course of action that will not allow me to repay your generosity in saving my life. I can't let my soldiers be killed. They were raised with me on the sea. They are my brothers. They have no bond of loyalty to Adol, or to my sister Karina. Whenever I think of their faces, I can't bring myself to let them die without at least trying to help—even if their deaths would expose the Talsh plot for all to see. My uncle Yunan, High General of Sangal, often said to me: “A king defends his nation from the rear guard. It is generals that ride at the head of the army, leading all the soldiers. Soldiers risk their lives so that the life of the king may be saved. Soldiers will only follow you if you are prepared to die to protect them.”

My soldiers' lives are in danger, Your Majesty. I can't hide behind you and watch them die. Forgive me. I entrust my sister Saluna to your care.

Chagum passed the letter to Shuga, who read it with a mortified expression. “Do you think we have time to stop him?” Shuga asked.

Chagum shook his head. “Impossible. We can't leave now, and we can't make ourselves conspicuous.”

He completely understood how Tarsan felt, but he also thought his actions were alarmingly reckless—immature, as Princess Karina might say. If he was only risking his own life, that would be one thing, but he seemed not to realize how many other people he'd endanger with his rash behavior. It was likely that he'd gone against Saluna's wishes, too, and Chagum couldn't forgive him for that.

***

While Chagum was getting upset on Saluna's behalf, Saluna was assisting with Tarsan's escape. She'd known in advance what he would do, and she hadn't stopped him. When she'd realized that his desire to save his soldiers was stubbornly ingrained and would not shift, a plan to support his had occurred to her as well. It was an odd example of symbiotic synergy, as if her plan and his had been designed to work together to support one another.

Even if Karina's plans went well tonight, Saluna and Tarsan had no immediate prospects. But if Saluna's plan worked, the two of them might be able to live freely again instead of fleeing and hiding in the shadows. Saluna chose to bet on her brother.

When she'd told him her plan, his eyes had lit up in admiration, and he'd sworn to her that he'd make the plan succeed. After seeing him off, Saluna knelt down on the floor in the light of the setting sun and prayed.

Mother of the sea, protect our small ship from stormy seas, and make us a safe path through the waves. I beg you.

***

After the King and his procession left to travel to the site of the Soul Return Ceremony, the banquet revelers picked up where they left off. The first group of singers and dancers to enter the hall were replaced by a fresh troupe of entertainers. The dancers were as lithe and supple as whips and capable of great feats of acrobatics. They soared through the air, tumbling and flipping from their hands to their feet before rising through the air again as if in flight.

From the edges of the hall to its center, fifteen men danced in unison, often crossing by one another in midair. Surrounding and complementing the male dancers were an equal number of beautiful female dancers.

The thirty dancers used their entire bodies and all the available space in the hall to whirl around the banquet's guests in a stunning display. The dancers wore bells around their wrists and ankles that glittered and tinkled as they moved, creating a cheerful song to encourage Prince Karnan's renewed health. The singers matched their song perfectly to the rhythm of the tinkling bells.

The assembled guests broke out in loud and prolonged applause. They seemed to completely forget about the King's solemn procession with the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita, so lost were they in the lavish richness of the performance.

Then the bell in the watchtower tolled again, signaling that the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita had arrived at the edge of Hosorou cape. The Soul Return Ceremony was about to begin.

Sitting in the seat nearest Prince Karnan, the first of the King of Kanbal's Spears, Kahm Musa, suddenly felt uneasy. This premonition of coming trouble was a well-trained bodyguard's trait.

Without showing even the slightest hint of exhaustion, the movements of the dancers in the hall became rougher and less coordinated. The bells jangled. Kahm saw one of the men face Prince

Karnan before leaping into the air with one hand extended. He left his seat and stretched his own arm out over Prince Karnan's litter to protect it.

Something glinted in the dancer's extended hand. The dancer flicked it and sent it flying in a straight line right at Karnan.

Kahm grabbed his short spear from its hiding place beneath Prince Karnan's litter and waved it aloft. There was a high keening sound of metal striking metal. Something small struck the ceiling and fell to the ground.

At the same moment, all thirty dancers—the men as well as the women—pulled out daggers concealed beneath their belts. They adjusted their grips on their weapons and threw them at Prince Karnan at the same time.

“Assassins!” Kahm called out. His declaration was echoed in the same breath by warriors of Rota, Kanbal, and New Yogo. The mats beneath their seats concealed shields and weapons, which the warriors took up before running toward Prince Karnan and forming a solid wall of protection around him.

Two warriors from Rota took daggers to the throat and chest and fell dead to the floor. A warrior from New Yogo was injured in the side and collapsed.

The door to the banquet hall slammed open, revealing Karnan's personal guards. They entered the banquet hall and stood before the King of Sangal's terrified retainers and the foreign guests with their swords raised, blocking any possible retreat for the assassins.

It was all over in a few moments. The assassins gathered in the center of the hall and gave themselves up.

The banquet hall lapsed into sudden silence. Prince Karnan sat up and said in a surprisingly robust tone of voice, “Throw these people out.”

The assassins' expressions became ones of wild desperation. They had failed to kill Crown Prince Karnan, so now there was nothing they

could do except wait for death. A muffled cry of despair echoed in the hall. Then the assassins produced more daggers from beneath the decorations covering their chests and attacked the men blocking the exit of the hall.

Screams came from every direction as weapons clashed together, shooting sparks. Blood sprayed everywhere until the air was thick with the stench of it. Some of the assassins managed to break through the line of defenders at the door and escape, but most were cut down where they stood.

The guards and the allies of Prince Karnan also suffered casualties. Many brave soldiers of Sangal were stretched out on the floor, groaning as they bled to death. Some had died instantly from their wounds.

Chagum looked around the room, trying to process the situation. It didn't seem real. So many people had died tragically and needlessly. He didn't even know their names. Men and women laid scattered on the floor of the hall, along with their possessions. There was so much blood. Some of the corpses had been disemboweled; the smell of the blood and fluid leaking from their wounds made Chagum want to vomit.

Why would anyone do this? Chagum thought. When he'd first conceived of this plan, he never thought that it would turn out like this. He had not expected the hidden weapons of the assassins, or that the men in the hall would be armed. He had considered the arrangement of protectors for Karnan largely as a precautionary measure.

Around him, men and women groaned and gasped as they struggled to breathe. The light in their eyes dimmed and went out as he watched. Chagum shook from head to toe. He couldn't understand what he was looking at. He felt like he was witnessing life itself disappearing. What was he supposed to think at a time like this?

Shuga was giving first aid to injured soldiers. Chagum heard Shuga call out to him, but his voice seemed impossibly far away. The entire world felt far away. Chagum realized dimly that the bell in the watchtower was ringing again. When it stopped ringing, Eshana would be thrown into the ocean.

Will the same violence that happened here happen at the ceremony, too? No, he thought decisively. *Enough. This is more than enough.*

As the bell tolled, Chagum felt rage and despair fill him, piercing him through. And then, he felt a splitting, agonizing pain in his forehead...

Chapter 4 - Hosorou Cape

The full moon shone down on the surface of the ocean, illuminating the rugged cape in dim outlines. The royal procession for the Soul Return Ceremony arrived at the very edge of the cape.

An altar had been erected in between the rocks. To one side of it was a huge bonfire. The priests lit a second large bonfire on the other side of the altar. This was the signal to the palace that the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita had arrived at the site of the ceremony. The bell ringer at the top of the watchtower would ring the bell one final time.

Two priests stood on each side of the altar, praying in low voices to the mother of the sea. Behind them were the attendants that guided the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita by the hand, followed by the King. Some steps behind the King, the Island Guardians lined up to observe the ceremony. The women of the royal family stood a small distance away from the altar, chanting prayers.

The King's personal guards and the ones that Karina had prepared especially for this occasion had been switched out with Prince Tarsan's personal guards. They formed a ring around the site of the ceremony. Footing was poor on the dark rocky cape, so the guards took their places and stood very still as they watched the ceremony unfold.

There was a low platform in the center of the altar. The two attendants of the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita gently took her hands and lifted her so that she stood on the platform. Her loose hair danced in the sea breeze. Soldiers brought a rope to tie around her too-thin waist; the other end of the rope was knotted around a large stone. The girl's body swayed as the rope fastened around her. It was sad to see.

Not yet.

Karina watched and waited for the decisive moment. She was thoroughly nervous. Adol and the other Island Guardians didn't know it, but having Tarsan's demoted men on duty tonight had been a trap that

Karina had orchestrated by removing the Island Guardians' soldiers from them and making Tarsan's men such an attractive target for fomenting unrest. They were hoping to use Tarsan's men against the King, but the men had been pulled into an entirely different kind of scheme.

Karina had seized on the chance to use Tarsan's men for her own reasons. Their numbers were not great, but they had all vowed undying loyalty to Tarsan. Leaving them in the King's military service would be dangerous... or so she'd said, to justify herself. She wouldn't have been able to switch their duties without a reason. Karina measured their risk of volatility against the success of her plan and thought that the benefits outweighed the risks.

If all went well, she'd be able to throw away the antiquated warrior code of extreme loyalty to an individual that had been with Sangal since its pirate days. Karina had no use for soldiers that were loyal to one man. She needed them to be loyal to the nation of Sangal.

Do it, soldiers. Commit treason. I'm waiting.

The signal for them to move was when the King formally announced that Tarsan would be executed—right after the ceremony ended. They were in a solid formation surrounding the King's bodyguards, poised to stab the King at the Island Guardians' orders. They'd doubtless been ordered to eliminate the King's bodyguards as well, but they lacked both the advantage of numbers and experience.

Everyone waited in tense silence for the sound of the words that would bring the ceremony to an end.

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The retainers holding the line of rope wrapped around the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita approached the King. The King stood directly in front of the girl and spoke the words of farewell for the ceremony.

“Attack!” Adol called out shrilly. All the Island Guardians drew concealed daggers from their clothing and rushed toward the King.

Adol ordered Tarsan's men: “Subdue the bodyguards! Break past them!”

The King stood stock still, then removed a short sword that had been hidden in his ceremonial robes and prepared to face his attackers. Karina steeled herself and waited for the King's bodyguards to demonstrate their skill.

Tarsan's soldiers moved to obey, but in that moment, an unexpectedly loud and clear voice called out of the dark: “*Dalgana!*”

Adol was at the head of the Island Guardians attacking the King. He whipped his head around, lost his footing and somersaulted head-first into the rocky ground. Adol's eyes lost focus as his limbs sprawled out. He saw something glinting out of the corner of his eye and received a shock like a blow from a heavy club in his right shoulder. The strikes kept coming, over and over again.

He tried to move, but it felt like his limbs were sewn to the ground. The other Island Guardians ceased fighting and stared as the motionless Adol was repeatedly struck by the blunt end of a spear.

Adol tried to focus and looked up. Above him stood a man with a spear. The light-bearers gradually moved closer, having heard the commotion of the fight, and Adol was able to identify his attacker: Prince Tarsan.

Everyone gasped.

“Does that hurt, Adol?” Tarsan asked. “I will *never* call you my brother ever again. Here, have a taste of what my brother Karnan must have felt!” he said in a voice as cold as ice.

Adol groaned as Tarsan towered over him. Tarsan looked up at Karina and said in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear: “This whole evening's been a terrific success, hasn't it? Because I attacked Karnan with that spear, you were able to unravel this whole plot. At first I thought this plan was too uncertain and reckless, but things really turned out well, yeah?”

“Uh...” Karina struggled to form words.

“It was all Saluna's idea. Isn't she amazing?”

To say such a thing, in such a place! Saluna had found a way to clear her and Tarsan's names. When Karina realized she'd been outplayed, she shook from head to toe.

“Come, men! Come, my brothers of the sea! If you were deceived, I forgive you. True enemies of the King, declare yourselves! I thank you from the bottom of my soul for following my orders and always believing in me!” Tarsan's powerful voice boomed so that all the people gathered on the cape heard it.

Tarsan's men sent up a cheer. The sound was so loud that it shook the ground beneath their feet. Tarsan stared directly at Karina the entire time.

The King was greatly bewildered by this unexpected turn of events, but he wasn't the King of Sangal for nothing. He soon grasped the current situation and regained his composure.

The King put his short sword away, cleared his throat, and addressed Tarsan. “That was incredible, Tarsan. As expected of my son.” He looked over at the Island Guardians. “Adol. All you others. The crime of attempting to murder the King while the country is in crisis is ___”

His words were cut off by another voice: “Don't move, King of Sangal. If you so much as twitch without my say-so, I will kill you instantly.”

The voice was that of a feeble young girl, but the tone was undoubtedly that of an adult speaker's. Everyone stood still as if their legs had been encased in ice. Standing on the platform of the altar directly behind the King, the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita lifted something small and shiny and thrust it into the King's neck.

The blindfold covering the girl's eyes was ripped away, revealing her face fully. She was smiling, but the smile was warped and twisted. “The dart you have embedded in your neck is connected to a vial of poison decocted from the rajul fish. I'm sure you have full awareness of this poison in Sangal...don't you, Your Majesty?”

Karina trembled in fear as she listened to the girl's voice. She'd been outmatched more than once tonight. No one could have expected that the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita would change so fundamentally in the space of an instant.

***

Eshana's soul looked down at the ceremony from above, but she was still trapped in the void between worlds. She could see everything that was happening, but she couldn't do anything. Such terrifying words were coming from her mouth! She felt like a spear had pierced her through.

She comprehended very little of the events she witnessed, much less why it was all happening in the first place, but she did know that she didn't like whoever was riding around in her body one bit. They were creepy. She knew they wanted to kill other people. She was scared and there wasn't anything at all that she could do.

"Mommy!" she cried out, "save me!" Eshana burst into tears. As loudly and strongly as she could, she screamed, "Mom!" into the void between worlds. It was a cry that shook her soul. She called for her mother over and over again. The bright blue water that surrounded her rippled from the force of her screams; the ripples formed wider rings with every new cry.

Eshana's scream crossed the void, and someone heard it.

***

Sharp pain ran from Chagum's forehead into his eyebrows and nose. The overwhelming scent of Nayugu's water washed over him. He heard a voice cry out. He calmed himself and rolled to his knees on the floor.

"Your Majesty?" Shuga hastily supported his limp body as it fell to the ground, but Chagum didn't feel the support of his hands at all.

Eshana's bloodcurdling screams echoed through his mind and heart.

I said, that's enough. Chagum gritted his teeth. *Too many people have died already.* He saw a solitary light shining from the void between worlds. It was like susuki fire, flickering and brightening. It seemed like it would go out at any moment. Chagum's anger flared up and became rage. The magic weaver was using an innocent girl's body as his tool. Karina was more than willing to sacrifice her if it would save the royal family. She had been abandoned and left to die.

Chagum opened his eyes and whispered, “Shuga, I'm sorry.”

Shuga started in surprise. “Your Majesty?”

Chagum closed his eyes. His Soul Thread emerged from his forehead as a shining shaft of light. In an instant, his soul stretched and shot out the window of the banquet hall, leaving a long white trail behind it.

Shuga was so stunned that he forgot to breathe as he watched Chagum's soul disappear from view. The moment his soul vanished in the distance, Chagum's body became astonishingly heavy. Shuga had to use all his strength to prevent him from falling.

I should follow him, as quickly as possible.

If he didn't catch up to Chagum's soul soon, Chagum might encounter the magic weaver alone—and Shuga did not believe Chagum capable of prevailing against the magic weaver.

But even though he had to hurry, Shuga couldn't bring himself to move. He felt numb, like he'd lost control of his own body. His stomach roiled. He'd never left his body as a soul before. Shuga swallowed and called out to a guard, “The Crown Prince has entered this state to protect himself from corruption. I must follow after him to protect his soul. While our bodies are defenseless, please protect us!”

Shuga pulled Chagum close to him so that their backs were against the wall, then sat down and leaned against the wall behind him. He chanted the words of a spell that Torogai had taught him, but nothing happened.

He heard screams and groans of pain around him and found it impossible to concentrate through the noise. “Only focus on the

spell," he muttered. "The spell is all that matters."

Shuga closed his eyes and chanted the words to the spell until he felt something strange. His body felt hot, as if it were on fire. He seemed to shrink down until he became a ball of incandescent light. He tried to focus his eyes and realized that he was looking at something odd: the bridge of his own nose, viewed from above.

As soon as he understood what he was looking at, he felt something like a breeze propel him through the air away from his body. The guard standing over him looked at him as if he was a puppet whose strings had been cut.

The bell was still ringing. Its echoes reverberated into the night.

***

The wind blowing from the site of the Soul Return Ceremony carried a cacophonous din to the the rocks below the cliff where Surina sat, crouched and waiting. She had no idea what was going on above her, but the sounds relayed to her by the night air were not reassuring. Surina cleared her ears and tried to hear better. She felt like she'd just fallen into a freezing current in the middle of the ocean with no one to help her. What was happening up there?

When the bell rang to signal the end of the ceremony, Surina took her jar of sandworms and placed it carefully down, being careful not to slip on the rocks. She read the wind's direction, then scattered the insects in the jar in an even layer around the bottom of the cape. The black waves took on a pale green cast and gradually became brighter. The entire time she worked, she could hear Eshana's voice crying out, calling for her mother. Surina was devastated for her.

"Eshana, please don't cry. I'll bring you to your mom soon. I promise," she said as she stared into the lightening waves.

***

Rasugu was drunk on the victory of trapping the King of Sangal with his poisoned dart. All he had to do was push down, and the King would die. *It's always better to do things with your own hands. I may have chosen the wrong man to negotiate with.*

Rasugu said in a tone of intimidating authority: “Prince Tarsan, soldiers, I command you to throw down your weapons. Right now. If you don't, I'll release the poison and kill the King.”

Tarsan gnashed his teeth, but it didn't seem like he had much choice. Eshana's body was concealed behind the King's bulk, and behind them was nothing but the edge of the cliff. He told the soldiers to lay down their arms and placed his own weapon on the ground.

“Good. Now, Prince Tarsan, Princess Karina—come here.” They each came a little closer. Rasugu said, “Stop right there. Now put your backs to me, and face the Island Guardians.”

Tarsan and Karina were perhaps three strides from the King. They did as commanded and faced the Island Guardians.

“Good. Island Guardians, the time has come to prove your loyalty. Show me the sincerity of your word.”

The Island Guardians, faces pale, looked up at Rasugu.

“I have condemned the King and his family to die at your hands. Show me.” The order was delivered in the light, sweet voice of a little girl.

As the Island Guardians looked on in shock, bright light shone before their eyes. It was so bright that Rasugu stumbled, but he quickly righted himself on top of the altar. He felt strange, like someone was knocking on the door of his mind. He tried to tighten his compulsion over the girl's flesh, but found himself dragged out of her by some coercive force.

Rasugu was yanked into the void between worlds. The soul of a boy stood before him, burning and seething with uncontrolled rage. Rasugu was shocked when he recognized his face. *You bastard...*

Rasugu was briefly stunned, but he soon recovered. “You are a cheeky little upstart, I'll give you that. Clearly, someone's taught you to project your soul, but do you really think you stand a chance against *me*?”

Chagum wreathed himself in the flames of his anger. The power of the soul was the power of the heart and mind. If he faltered here, he would die.

The magic weaver gave him an unsettling smile and rapidly swelled up in size so that he covered the sky above like storm clouds. His face split open, revealing slimy fangs that swiped directly at Chagum. Saliva coated Rasugu's mottled transmogrified face and mouth. A red-black tongue darted out of his gaping maw. He was so huge that he blotted out Chagum's line of sight. The stench of blood clung to his body.

He wants to swallow me up! Chagum was terrified, but at that moment he recalled what Tanda had told him: *Changing your shape changes the capabilities of your soul. It takes power, but it also frees you from limitations.* He knew how to change his soul's shape.

Just as Rasugu's foul-smelling mouth engulfed him, Chagum closed his eyes and changed into a falcon. With a strong flap of his wings, Chagum aimed for Rasugu's red-black tongue and used his beak and talons to tear it to pieces.

Blood sprayed everywhere. Chagum heard screaming. As he watched, Rasugu's terrible monstrous face was shredded to ribbons, revealing the real face of the magic weaver underneath.

Why you little...

Rasugu hesitated at being so unexpectedly countered by Chagum. He hadn't considered the possibility before since Chagum was a prince, but he clearly knew and had been taught by a magic weaver. But all the monarchs of Yogo, in both the old and new kingdoms, despised magic weaving—so why did the Crown Prince know it?

Although Rasugu was thoroughly confused, he wasted no time preparing another attack. He changed his hands into fire and seized the falcon, attempting to crush Chagum to death.

My entire body's burning! Chagum shrieked in pain. But then, the fiery hands crushing him vanished completely. His surroundings became pitch black.

“Your Majesty.”

Chagum shook as he opened his eyes. Shuga was holding him up. He still remembered vividly how it felt to be burned alive, but when he looked at Shuga's face, strength came welling up from within him. The two of them helped one another stand up straight. They faced the magic weaver together.

***

The people standing on the edge of Hosorou cape were completely unaware of the struggle to the death that was occurring between the three souls locked in combat. The King felt the hands of the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita loosen suddenly and rapidly stepped away from the terrifying girl, removing the dart from his neck as he moved. The dart fell from the girl's limp fingers as he stepped away.

The girl swayed on the altar platform, then collapsed and fell to the ground like a wisp of cloth blown away by the wind.

“Kill her,” the King commanded the surrounding soldiers. “Throw her body into the sea!”

***

Eshana trembled as she looked down at the battle between souls. When the King spoke, she turned her attention to him and saw soldiers lifting her body up as if it were a rag doll. *They'll throw me over the cliff!* Eshana screamed and rushed back to her body.

***

Rasugu noticed when Eshana reclaimed her body and when the King escaped the threat of his poison. Thanks to this frankly irritating distraction by the Crown Prince of New Yogo, he'd been away from her body for too long; he felt his control of it slipping away.

It would be worth killing the Crown Prince here, but although he was inexperienced, he had the help of another magic weaver. Rasugu was not certain he could prevail against both of them. This was the nature of his work: every situation presented potential risk and reward. He'd been ordered to make an immediate retreat if his mission failed.

Rasugu crouched down and decided definitively that he couldn't win here, no matter how much he wanted to. The fight was over—for now. He chuckled. “Crown Prince, look. They're going to kill that little girl.”

Rasugu changed himself into a small flame and disappeared into the void.

Chagum looked down at Eshana in surprise. She struggled weakly against the soldiers holding her up. One of the soldiers lifted a large stone. At the same time as the soldier holding Eshana, the soldier holding the stone threw his burden over the edge of the cliff.

Eshana screamed as she fell. Chagum lined himself up with Eshana's body and flew after her as fast as he could, but he wasn't able to grab hold of her as a soul. He felt her hand pass through his as she kept falling. In her utter terror, Eshana's soul passed into the void. Chagum seized her hand before she could slip out of reach.

Something was glowing in the ocean below. Chagum felt the shock of Eshana's body hitting the water as if it were happening to him personally. He felt like he'd been slammed into a board at great speed; his body felt like it would shatter and break apart. He suddenly found it very difficult to breathe. Pulled down by the weight of the stone, Eshana's body became increasingly heavier as she sank.

The darkness of the ocean floor spread out around them. That dark world drew closer and closer as Eshana neared the very bottom of the sea. Chagum struggled to hold on, unable to breathe and about to black out from the pain when he felt someone seize his arm.

“Your Majesty! You must let go of Eshana!” He heard Shuga's voice echoing in his ears. “She can't be saved, but you don't have to die! Let her go!”

Chagum watched Eshana's pale face stiffen and turn blue, but he refused to let go of her hand. Shuga didn't let go of Chagum, either. Three souls fell connected into the darkness.

***

Prince Tarsan leaned over the edge of the cliff as Eshana fell and noticed something glowing in the ocean below. “Huh... Are those sandworms?”

Sandworms weren't naturally occurring on the shore of Hosorou cape. As he stared down at the dancing light shimmering in the water, he identified the shadow of someone standing among the rocks. As soon as he locked eyes on them, the figure dove from the rocks into the water.

Shivers ran up Tarsan's spine. The form of the dive was beautiful, graceful and perfect: the exact same as Yata's, Eshana's father. Tarsan spun on his heel and retrieved his spear from the ground where he'd dropped it, then faced the cliff again.

Some of the soldiers around him seemed to know what he intended and called out to him as he made a running start toward the cliff. He vaulted upwards when he reached the edge of the cape, using his spear for leverage to leap higher, then dove directly into the ocean, still holding his weapon. The dive was impressive: worthy of any experienced fisherman on any of Sangal's islands. Despite the presence of his spear in one hand, his dive described a perfect arc.

***

When Eshana's screams echoed in her ears, Surina knew that Eshana's soul had finally returned to her body. Surina dove into the dark water in the direction of the screams.

The waves were choppier than she'd expected. Though she dived down as far as she could, the tide was too strong and kept pushing her back toward shore. She watched Eshana's limp body, which was faintly illumined by sandworms, as it drifted farther and farther away from her. Surina swam desperately forward with all her strength to reach her.

There was a terrific splash somewhere ahead of her. She saw the shadow of a diving figure sink beneath the waves. The light of the sandworms rippled around the impact point of the diver; bubbles

swirled around them in a tiny whirlpool. Each time the diver's strong arm strokes cut through the choppy waves, they churned up sandworms that created a glowing trail pointing directly to the diver in a straight line.

Surina traced the diver's progress as she swam forward. The diver looked like a snake made of light. The two of them chased relentlessly after Eshana.

***

Surrounded by pale green light, Tarsan took Eshana's body in one arm and cut the rope binding her to the stone with the tip of his spear. The stone continued sinking, leaving a trail of large bubbles behind as it descended to the ocean floor.

Eshana's body was as light as a feather as he took her in one arm and swam rapidly toward the surface. When his face broke the surface of the water, he felt someone else next to him that helped support Eshana. He had no time to look at the swimmer's face, but the two of them managed to keep Eshana's head above water as they swam to shore.

When they reached the rocks, they rapidly lifted Eshana onto solid ground and began chest compressions to get Eshana to cough up any water she'd swallowed.

***

Eshana felt herself breathe.

At the same moment, the darkness engulfing her soul faded until it completely disappeared. Chagum and Shuga's souls were still linked to hers. With that single breath, the darkness was beaten back, causing strength to return to them all.

Eshana writhed and coughed up water. Chagum and Shuga felt the chill night air as if they were standing right next to her on the rocks beneath the cape. As her Soul Thread connected firmly to her body, the two souls linked to hers felt themselves lifted upward by the wind.

Chapter 5 - The Statesman's Shame

After Surina and Tarsan rescued Eshana and got her breathing again, Tarsan faced Surina and told her sternly to run. “I have no time to ask why you're here, but you have to leave, now,” he said in a voice of command. But Surina didn’t understand why she had to run, so she hesitated.

“Run, I said! When the soldiers get here, you won't be able to escape!”

Surina's shoulders collapsed inward. “You're saying I should make a run for it with Eshana?”

Tarsan shook his head at her. “I don't know what's going to happen with Eshana. I'm not even sure saving her was the right thing to do. When I saw you dive, my body just moved without thinking. I thought I was seeing Yata dive in after her, even though that's impossible...”

Pale moonlight fell on Tarsan's face. He frowned deeply, clearly in pain. “Since we saved her, she'll have to be taken to the stone dungeons to prevent anyone from using her for magic. But you can still get away if you move quickly. Forget everything that happened tonight. Don't tell anyone about it.”

Surina didn’t understand what he wanted from her, but she stood up quickly in response to his urgent tone. Eshana coughed painfully and started shivering. There was no way that Surina could just leave her there like that. Eshana coughed again and opened her eyes, blinking repeatedly as she tried to focus her vision. When she looked into Surina's eyes, she recognized her and burst into tears. She was like a child that had been lost for a long time and had finally found her mother.

She’d survived so many painful and terrifying things by the skin of her teeth. Against all odds, she'd been saved. The thread of nervous

tension inside her had been pulled too tight for too long, and it finally snapped.

If Surina chose to run then, she knew she'd regret it later. She took Eshana in her arms and wrapped her in a strong hug. Her body was so light. Her long weeks spent as the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita had left her little more than skin and bones.

Even when Surina heard the footsteps of the soldiers approaching, she didn't move. She remained as she was, crouched down on the rocky shore holding Eshana while looking up at Tarsan.

Eshana didn't say a word as they were led away from the rocks and into Sangal's stone dungeons beneath the palace. Her skin was cold and clammy from having been submerged for so long. She trembled like a terrified puppy in Surina's arms all night. Her skin became hot to the touch; by dawn, she was wandering in a fever.

Prince Tarsan ordered his soldiers to bring her and Eshana warm blankets. Tarsan stared directly at them as the men passed the blankets through the cell's iron bars. He appeared incredibly nervous; his skin stretched over his face like leather over a beaten drum.

"I'll come for you in the morning. I'll do everything I can in your defense, so please don't worry." He shifted his gaze from Surina to Eshana, who was still in Surina's lap. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it, turned on his heel and withdrew.

Tarsan seemed to fear Eshana for some reason, but Surina wasn't scared of her at all. Though she'd obviously been through a lot and much was still shrouded in mystery, Surina had touched her soul during the festival under the sea. She knew that the little girl burning up in her arms was Eshana, and no one else.

The Nayugul Raita gave her soul back...probably because of me. If Surina explained things with her whole heart, she was sure Prince Tarsan and other people would understand.

Surina leaned against the stone wall of the dungeon and passed the long night holding Eshana in her arms. A faint light shone through the iron prison bars onto the damp earth floor.

The night passed slowly. Surina lost track of time. Her eyes opened when she heard footsteps; she realized that she'd fallen asleep at some point.

“Surina.”

When she identified the face of the person addressing her, she was astonished. “Pr...princess Saluna?” She had seen her face from afar dozens of times on the islands, but she'd never seen her up close before.

“I'm glad you're safe,” Princess Saluna said. “Has anyone brought you anything to eat or drink?”

Surina blinked. “They probably did, but I don't remember. I didn't mean to fall asleep.”

Princess Saluna passed a small jar and some packets wrapped in paper through the bars of the cell. The jar was profoundly heavy and full of cold liquid. It was fruit juice. When Surina realized that Princess Saluna had given them more than enough food and drink to recover their strength, she was deeply grateful.

“Thank you so much!”

Princess Saluna nodded, then whispered something to Surina. She didn't understand why the princess would say something so shocking to her, but she nodded under the pressure of Princess Saluna's stern gaze.

I should have run away when Prince Tarsan told me to...

***

A slick, slimy red-black tongue laved Chagum's body all over. It exuded a terrible smell that made Chagum groan and roll over in his sleep. He felt like he'd been defiled in some way and that the corruption was seeping further into his body until he smelled exactly the same as that awful tongue. He experienced flash memories of bodies cut to pieces with their organs spilling out; he convulsed as he watched the light leave people's eyes. The tongue licked at him the entire time.

He cried out and attempted to move his hands, but his joints felt like they'd been fixed in position with glue. He couldn't move at all. The tips of his fingers and toes rotted slowly away as the corruption spread through him.

“Think about the ocean, Your Majesty.” He heard Shuga's voice.

Chagum saw the horrible tongue split in two and felt something cold press into his forehead.

“Look at the surface of the ocean. Look!”

Chagum blinked and saw the ocean spreading out beneath him. Cold water slammed into his face; his nose hurt sharply as he inhaled and his body was completely engulfed by the waves. He kept sinking, sinking, farther and farther down to the ocean floor. The feeling of corruption and defilement clinging to him washed away completely, leaving him with the comfortable sensation of clean skin.

Chagum continued to sink deeper into the darkness. It was quiet. He couldn't see anyone; there wasn't anyone to see. The smell of the ocean was all around him.. He felt the soft touch of someone's hand on his forehead.

“Crown Prince Chagum?”

When Chagum opened his eyes, he felt like he'd just surfaced from the depths of the sea in an instant. He wasn't sure where he was for a few moments. The ceiling above him was speckled with faintly glowing silver flecks, which told him that he must be in his room in Sangal's palace. The flecks in the ceiling were formed from bits of shell from nocturnal shellfish. Shuga stood quietly by his bed.

“Shuga... I just had a terrible nightmare.”

Shuga nodded. His usually stern face was streaked with salt, revealing that he'd recently been crying.

“Shuga, why were you crying?”

Shuga smiled at him. “I'm glad you've returned to us,” he said quietly.

Chagum felt warmth spread through his chest. He realized that he was urgently thirsty. The sound of the sea, which he'd gotten used to hearing in Sangal, seemed somehow distant.

“Your Majesty, Princess Saluna is waiting in the side chamber.” Shuga told Chagum that Princess Saluna had told him to convey everything that had happened the previous night, so that Chagum would understand why she and Tarsan were now able to move freely. He also told Chagum that Eshana was being kept prisoner in the stone dungeons.

Chagum listened carefully, then asked, “Why would you tell me that? You knew what I'd do if you told me.”

Shuga's eyebrows rose. He gave Chagum a bitter smile. “I made a promise, Your Majesty, to tell you anything I knew or discovered of the Talsh plot, even if knowing would put you in danger. I know that you aren't the kind of person to leave an innocent person to die.” Shuga stared at him. “I never used to, but I now believe in the kind of ruler that can keep their soul pure while still fulfilling their role.”

Shuga's voice cut through Chagum just as it had cut through the red-black tongue in his nightmare. A cool breeze passed over him, relaxing all his muscles as if he'd just indulged in a long stretch. Chagum smiled brightly. When Shuga saw it, his heart overflowed with joy.

“Your Majesty. Would you be willing to leave saving Eshana to me?”

Chagum looked anxiously at him. Shuga said, “Perhaps we can leave that decision for later. For now, you should get some sleep. Further discussions with the King and Princess Karina will be quite taxing, I'm sure. Won't you rest a little?” Shuga smiled. His lips were chapped from thirst.

“All right, I will,” Chagum said. “But we should hurry if we're going to help.”

“Leave it to me, Your Majesty. I'm used to staying up all night to read the stars.”

***

Saluna waited in Chagum's side room. She rose from her seat when she saw Shuga approach. He looked like he hadn't slept all night, either. His face was like her own: pale and drawn.

“How is His Majesty?” Saluna asked.

“Thank you for your concern. He appears to be out of danger. Thank you for telling me about Eshana. I am most grateful.”

Saluna shook her head. “It was nothing. I'm the one that should be thanking you. Crown Prince Chagum has done more for me and Prince Tarsan that can ever be expressed in words.” She paused. “What do we do now?”

“I have an errand. His Majesty has entrusted me with a task. But,” Shuga said in a hushed whisper, “if you assisted me, would it harm your current position?”

Saluna giggled. “Whenever I think about what happened last night, I don't think I'll ever be afraid of anything ever again.” Despite her exhaustion, her eyes remained vibrant.

“This country's biggest problem is not one poor fisherman's daughter,” Shuga said. “Besides, it's always better to give the accused a fair trial instead of simply killing them without due cause. This is a precept that was drilled into me as both a statesman and a diplomat.”

Saluna looked up at Shuga and smiled. “I'm sure other statesmen were taught differently. But, come. I am most curious to see how the King views such matters.”

***

Karnan was still in his sickbed, resting after the events of the previous evening. The rest of the royal family, the King's chief retainers, and Sangal's generals passed the night and early morning in a closed emergency consultation. The most urgent issue was the matter of the Talsh invasion, followed closely by how to handle Sangal's traitorous

Island Guardians. The topic of what to do with Eshana never came up over the course of the long night.

When all the most pressing matters had been decided, Saluna left the meeting to stretch her legs and get feeling back in her limbs after sitting still for so long. When she returned to the meeting, she reported Crown Prince Chagum's role in advising and supporting her and Tarsan as they'd figured out the Talsh plot together. She didn't neglect to praise Shuga for his assistance as well, so the King had Shuga summoned to the emergency meeting.

When Shuga stepped into the meeting hall, the King greeted him with a wide smile. “Please come in, Lord Shuga.”

“I thank you for inviting me to this meeting and permitting me to speak, Your Majesty.”

“What's all this stuffy formality? You are among friends. Please tell us how Crown Prince Chagum fares and if there is anything we can do to assist with his recovery.”

Shuga nodded. “That is just the matter that I came to discuss with Your Majesty.”

The King of Sangal's eyes searched his face for portents and possible hidden meanings. Shuga spoke in a calm and measured tone. “As you know, the Mikado of New Yogo is a saint through whom the blood of a god flows. Naturally, Crown Prince Chagum is also such a divine being. It is the traditional duty of the New Yogo royal family's servants to shield them from the sight of death and bloodshed.

“But I failed in my duty, and the Crown Prince was overcome by the sight of the massacre in the banquet hall last night. He did not simply see others die, but knew that they had died or were dying based on his own orders. He was stunned by the shame of such an act, so much so that his soul is currently suffering a sickness known as soul corruption. If things progress as they currently are, his life could soon be in danger.”

The King of Sangal's eyebrows drew together. The idea of a pure soul being corrupted and making its owner physically ill struck him as

somewhat dubious. Did Shuga intend to blame Sangal for the sickness of the prince's soul?

“Ah, I see. I am terribly sorry that the Crown Prince had to undergo such a violent experience. If his condition worsens, we will of course do everything possible to save him. It is the least we can do to express our thanks.”

Hidden beneath his words was a veiled threat to the man standing before him: *I expect you to help save the prince to the best of your abilities, too, Star Reader—as you did Prince Karnan.* “We will seek out any medicine you require, no matter how rare or expensive.”

Shuga bowed slightly. “Thank you. I have indeed come to ask for such a boon.”

The King wrinkled his forehead. He didn't understand what Shuga wanted, exactly. “Of course. It's only natural to want to save someone's life when they've saved your own. What kind of medicine do you require?”

Shuga opened his eyes wide and stared in supplication at the king. “To save the Crown Prince's life, we must purify his soul. In order to cleanse a soul that has witnessed so much murder and death, he must see the remarkable act of a life being saved with his own eyes. The light of life will cleanse the corruption of death. Please, help me save him!”

The entire royal family, even Princess Karina, stared at Shuga as if they didn't comprehend what he was asking for at all. They waited for him to continue speaking.

Shuga smiled mildly. “The Crown Prince is an incredibly tender-hearted person. To see an innocent child die would grieve him greatly. The thought of it happening torments him even now. I believe that sparing the girl called Eshana publicly would be the best possible medicine for His Majesty the Crown Prince.”

“Are you referring to the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita?”

Shuga nodded.

Now both Karina and the King understood exactly what Shuga was asking for, and why.

“The girl is called the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita in Sangal,” Shuga said. “But the spirit that spoke to you through her was not one of the Nayugul Raita, but was instead a malevolent magic weaver.”

The King felt goosebumps rise along the nape of his neck. The place where the poisoned dart had pricked him still stung. He cleared his throat. “The girl is undoubtedly still the tool of this magic weaver. Bringing such a corrupted person before Crown Prince Chagum may be too dangerous.”

“There's no need to worry about that,” Shuga said smoothly. “I felt the magic weaver flee from the girl's body. I practice the art of Tendo, which is a kind of magic weaving used in star reading. Crown Prince Chagum ordered me to protect Your Majesty and Your Majesty's family at any cost, but the scope of my own power was too small. I could do nothing but pray to the gods.

“But the Crown Prince is descended from a god, so the foul magic weaver was unable to go against his will. I felt the magic weaver suddenly retreat when faced with the Crown Prince's resistance. That is what ultimately saved your life, Your Majesty. What I witnessed last night was an experience that shook my very soul.”

Shuga had answered all the King's questions and objections expertly. He remained silent while the royal family deliberated. Princess Karina finally broke the silence. “Please forgive us for our misunderstanding. We are not Yogoese, and have no knowledge of Tendo. Therefore we found your explanation difficult to credit until you presented it fully.”

Shuga was clearly desperate to get the royal family to believe his story. Karina thought that it was probably a bluff. Crown Prince Chagum, Tarsan and Saluna all wanted to save Eshana: that was common knowledge. All of this was undoubtedly a lie dreamed up to save her life. Why had that magic weaver dropped the dart from her father's neck and suddenly collapsed? She still didn't know the answer, but she thought it was a bit too convenient for Shuga to have the ability to see through magic.

If it was true that the Crown Prince of New Yogo had saved the King's life by repelling the magic weaver, the kingdom of Sangal owed New Yogo a tremendous debt of gratitude. Karina opened her mouth to say something, but Shuga beat her to it.

“I thank you for your consideration. Since we've established that the magic weaver has been driven off, and I myself have confirmed it, I do not believe there would be any danger in leading the child before the Crown Prince.”

Karina understood that Shuga had crafted this entire pretext on the Crown Prince's behalf—and that it would work. If the danger was past, there was no reason for the King to deny his request. Eshana's sentence was as good as decided.

“Father, let us display our good faith to our staunch allies Crown Prince Chagum and Lord Shuga. They are wise, and have used their wisdom to avert disaster. Granting such a boon would be a show of strength and courage on our part as well.”

The King looked at Karina for a few moments, then nodded as a sign that he trusted her decision. Karina faced Shuga with a serious expression.

“Lord Shuga, you have shown keen insight into this situation. We of Sangal are largely unacquainted with magic, and live in fear of it. But you are more versed in these matters, and if you say the magic weaver has fled, we will believe you.”

Karina rang a small hand bell, summoning servants to her side. “Bring the girl in the stone dungeons to this hall immediately.”

While waiting for the servants to return, Karina thought of ways to pacify Crown Prince Chagum. The girl in the dungeons below was already dying. After placing the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita and the Rassharou girl in the dungeons, Karina had called upon her most trusted servants to watch over the prisoners until dawn to ensure they'd be given nothing to eat or drink. Then, when they were at their weakest, Karina had ordered her servants to give the prisoners food and water laced with a certain drug that was used to induce long, deep

sleep. In their current state, the drug's effects would kill them. It was a relatively painless way to die; the drug had been used for generations for the purposes of eliminating enemies of Sangal’s royal family.

The little girl had caught a fever after being thrown from the cliff. Many people had seen her with the Rassharou girl. It would not be at all suspicious for the child to die of a fever. Now all of Karina's planning was for nothing.

Karina sighed. Crown Prince Chagum was a skilled tactician, for all that he was so young.

There was a knock on the door of the hall. Karina's servants announced their return. The door opened, revealing the servants and the two prisoners from the dungeon on the other side. Karina stood ramrod straight as they entered the hall. The Rassharou girl carried Eshana closely clutched to her chest. Karina saw Saluna give the Rassharou girl a slight nod. The girl stepped further into the hall, among the onlookers.

Eshana was flushed with fever. She opened her eyes blearily and lifted her head. Then, like an infant, she stuck her thumb firmly in her mouth and looked out at the people surrounding her with unsteady glittering eyes.

Epilogue - Falcon Flying Through the Void

Each of the Island Guardians received the Three-Day Judgment. They were imprisoned for the entire length of their sentence and new Island Guardians were chosen from among their sons and siblings. The King said to these new Island Guardians, “You must swear loyalty to the nation of Sangal, and that you will never engage in traitorous relations with other nations. Swear this, and there is a chance that after the war the imprisoned ex-Island Guardians will receive some

compassion.” Thus, their brothers and fathers were held as hostages to ensure their loyalty.

As for the King of Sangal's foreign guests, those that had observed the assassination attempt on Prince Karnan in the banquet hall censured the King harshly. New Yogo, Kanbal and Rota were the only nations that knew the whole truth of what had happened. The guests of other nations were further angered by the fact that representatives of New Yogo, Kanbal and Rota had concealed weapons in the banquet hall.

The King of Sangal honestly and forthrightly told all his guests that the actions of his allies had managed to save Sangal from Talsh invasion. So much was clear from looking at the casualties: New Yogo and Rota had each lost men in Sangal's defense, and many of Sangal's guards and soldiers at the palace had died.

Sangal had the role of defending the northern continent against the south. Consequently, it had been the first to face the threat of a Talsh attack. The King used every means at his disposal to convince the nations of the northern continent to support Sangal as much as possible to fend off the invasion of their own nations by the Talsh empire. The Sangal navy gathered in the harbor and goods were shipped to the capital in large quantities to prepare Sangal for war. The southern sky was as blue as it always had been, but people looked at it with growing unease. The threat of the huge empire to the south spread fear over Sangal.

Tarsan wasn't able to see Chagum off—instead, Chagum said goodbye to him before he set out with the navy for his first battle. Tarsan was set to board a ship the morning before Chagum returned to New Yogo. Before he left, one last feast was held for Sangal's foreign guests. Tarsan presided over the farewell ceremonies.

First, Tarsan relayed the King's orders regarding the steps Sangal would be taking to secure the kingdom. In the wide open space, Tarsan's voice carried as well as his father's did. He declared the truth of the Talsh plot with the strength and conviction of his own life behind

it. His posture was stiff from the rigor required for the ceremony. The pose made him appear even taller and stronger than usual.

As musicians played on shaguram flutes, Tarsan offered each of the King's guests a personal farewell. When Tarsan stepped in front of Chagum, he was briefly overcome with emotion and bowed deeply. “Crown Prince Chagum. I will never forget what you have done for us.”

Chagum looked at Tarsan from behind his face covering and offered him equal thanks. Tarsan's polished armor gleamed, reflecting the lights in the hall. Suddenly, the reality of Tarsan being sent to war hit home for Chagum. He might never see Tarsan again. He was the first friend of his own age that Chagum had ever made, and this was goodbye. Was Tarsan scared? What did he think of going to war and attacking people, and being attacked in turn?

Tarsan held his head high, his eyes shining with strength and pride.

“I pray for your success in battle, Prince Tarsan,” Chagum said. “I will never forget you.”

Tarsan grinned widely at him. He leaned in a bit closer and whispered, “Your Majesty, I need to apologize. The first time we met, I got angry because of that face cloth that you wear. Hiding behind it so that people couldn't look at you directly seemed a little...well, to tell you the truth, I still don't like it. I can't see your eyes.” Tarsan smiled warmly. “I guess I'll have to win this war quickly so I can see your face again.”

Tarsan bowed once more, then moved away to bid the other guests farewell. Chagum watched him go, his face flushed from the heat and having his head covered. He felt the distance between them growing. He missed Tarsan already.

I hate the face covering, too. I've always hated it.

But he and Tarsan were princes. Chagum wondered if Tarsan understood the face covering in that context—as something duty demanded. He watched Tarsan lead a long line of proud, strong soldiers out of the hall. If Chagum was ever in the same position, he was sure he

wouldn't feel pride or strength, but pain. It would hurt, leading men off to die.

***

Light rain fell steadily on the roof at dawn. Surina was at Rakora's, boning and gutting the small fish she'd caught while listening to the rain. Eshana was still asleep. She'd been greatly weakened by her weeks spent as the Eyes of the Nayugul Raita. Her fever still hadn't gone down. As soon as she recovered, Surina intended to take her home to her mother.

She also had to consider what she would do after getting back to Kalsh. She wanted to see her family again, but if she headed to the islands where the Talsh kept their slaves now, there was a high possibility that she'd get mixed up in the war between Talsh and Sangal.

I kept my promise. I'm sure Dogol did, too. My family is safe on those islands. I'm sure of it. Surina did her best to encourage herself as she continued preparing the fish. She wanted to return to Kalsh soon. If she had her way, she'd never go near Sangal's royal palace again.

Whenever she remembered what Princess Saluna had told her on the morning she'd woken up in the stone cell with Eshana, a shudder went through her whole body. She didn't understand why anyone would want to poison her and Eshana. They had nearly been crushed between the royal family's fingers like wharf roaches crawling along the hull of a ship. It was a bitter experience, one she wouldn't forget. She wanted nothing further to do with the palace.

The wind blew over the sea up to the boundless sky. She missed the sound of the waves lapping against her small ship. She'd return to Kalsh very soon. Eshana's mother would probably weep for joy when she saw her again. The King had also granted Surina a large monetary reward, so she could bring the islanders many strange and wonderful gifts from the capital. Everyone would be happy to see them. When she thought about that, her heavy heart got a little lighter.

***

Chagum and Shuga prepared for their departure while listening to the drizzling rain.

“The rain just won't stop,” Saluna grumbled as she watched Chagum board the oxcart.

“I'm sure we'll see each other again,” Chagum said.

Saluna gave him a lonely smile, then nodded.

Chagum's cart traveled slowly, step by slow step, away from Sangal's royal palace. The cart stopped at Sangal Hasai, the Hill of the Full Moon, for a short rest, just as it had before they'd arrived at the palace. It was just about noon when the oxcart halted.

As Chagum stood high up on the hill, the rain stopped. Chagum could scarcely believe that only twelve days had passed since he'd last stood in this place. He felt Shuga's presence behind him and looked down at the thin clouds reflected on the surface of the ocean. The clouds drifted slowly overhead. The light of the sun was dim, but far away along the curve of the horizon, golden light was barely visible.

It was silent all around, like the silence before a great and terrible storm. The continent to the south was no longer just a passage in a history book to Chagum. He wondered what form the Talsh invasion would take and what he would do when it came. Buffeted on the advancing waves, his heart longing for the light on the horizon, constantly chasing it...

He heard the whistling call of a bird. A falcon glided over the ocean, between the sea and the sky.

“Shuga.”

“Yes?”

“I'm kind of dangerous as a Crown Prince, aren't I?”

Shuga's eyebrows rose. He frowned as if he were trying to figure out what Chagum meant.

“Sometimes, I can't be held back,” Chagum said. “Being a godlike prince of New Yogo is like that. Unrestricted. Unrestrained.”

Shuga offered him a pained smile. “I suppose you're right.”

Chagum didn't turn to look at him. He kept his gaze fixed on the sea and the bird flying above it. “When I was falling to my death with Eshana, you didn't let go of my hand. You've given me something far more than loyalty or duty. Thank you.”

Shuga blinked and said nothing.

“Forgive me, Shuga. I'm dangerous, so I might destroy you one day without meaning to. I might try to drag you down with me. If you ever feel that happening, I want you to let go. I don't want you to hate or resent me, and I don't want you to die. Live. Find some other way to help the country.”

“Your Majesty...”

The falcon flew farther and farther away until it was a speck on the horizon. Chagum tracked it with his eyes. “I intend to keep being dangerous. Like a falcon flying through the void between the sea and the sky, connected to both of them but influenced by neither. I'll do nothing but fly. I want to make a country where soldiers' lives aren't sacrificed like pawns in a game, and where I can talk to my people without the need to hide my face from them. Do you think that's just a dream? Even if it is, I'll fly with it. I'll keep it in my heart.”

Chagum turned to face Shuga. “I don't think your genius is limited only to star reading and matters of government. When you see the other world, keep looking at it. Experience the new perspective and don't close your eyes to it. Never blind yourself to the other world.”

A single tear fell down Shuga's cheek.

Above their heads, the clouds parted, bathing their shoulders in bright light. It was a light from the southern countries, clear and strong and golden.

This is the end of *Traveler of the Void*. The story continues in *Guardian of the God - God's Appearance*.

Afterword - Traveler of the Void

Rowing Across New Seas

Standing at the train ticket counter in Jiyugaoka, I suddenly caught sight of a woman. It was Satake Miho: I was sure of it. She had a notebook in one hand and carried a bag, and although I was certain it was her, I wanted some form of confirmation. For her part, Satake Miho had recognized me as well; we called out to one another at the same time.

My editor approached us and asked, “Huh? Do you know each other?” She was as surprised as I was. I couldn't explain it, but I'd recognized Satake Miho on sight, even though I'd never seen her before.

***

During lectures and events, people often ask why the cover of *Traveler of the Void* looks different from the other books in the *Guardian of the Spirit* series. Up until now, the series has been illustrated by Futaki Makiko, but she's become outrageously busy. She's an animator at Studio Ghibli, and works day and night animating movies. Under the pressure of such a heavy and unrelenting workload, it became impossible for her to keep drawing art for the series.

When the manuscript of *Traveler of the Void* was complete and it came time to draw the cover, I discovered Futaki Makiko's current work situation and decided to wait until her work on the movies ended...but her workload showed no signs of slowing down for an entire year. And then I was *really* in trouble—what could I do now? My editor and I put our heads together and decided that because *Traveler of the Void* was a slightly different story than the rest of the *Guardian of the Spirit* books (with Chagum as main protagonist and a setting switch to another

nation), it made sense to use a different style of art. And so we decided to approach another artist to draw the art for the book.

But the problem wasn't that simple. The *Guardian of the Spirit* books are a series and the readers are used to Futaki Makiko's art. The artist would have to evoke her same style, but artists all have individual styles, and being asked to illustrate a book in the middle of a series is a somewhat intimidating proposition.

Leaving all those considerations aside for a moment, we did have some idea of who we'd like to ask to draw the art: Satake Miho. I've always loved her depictions of other worlds and I believed that commissioning her would be our best choice. But I also thought that working with her was a dream that was out of reach.

But Satake Miho didn't just respond favorably to my and my editor's requests: she managed to produce art in the same vein as the previous books, with her own individual style, in record time. She surprised me a great deal. Throughout the entire process, I thought she was amazing. I think this series has been blessed by the work of talented professionals throughout its publication history.

***

Traveler of the Void could be considered the series' first spinoff from the main plot, but it's actually not. The events here connect directly to those in *Guardian of Heaven and Earth*, the tenth volume in the series. The “Guardian” books feature Balsa as the main protagonist, and the “Traveler” books feature Chagum as a the protagonist. The as yet unpublished *Those Who Walk the Flame Road* will feature Hugo as the protagonist.

Changing the direction and orientation of the series in this way may seem strange, but when the whole series is put together, it's clear that many people get tangled up in Balsa and Chagum's story. Like a tapestry woven of threads of many colors, every color contributes to the picture as a whole. At least, I hope that's what people will think.

Traveler of the Void adds depth and richness to the series' world, and I consider it a precious and indispensable volume in the series.

Uehashi Nahoko

July 6, 2007

Illustrator's Notes

“So, just how thick should this spear be?” I asked. Ever detailed, Professor Uehashi assumed the pose of a soldier, seized an invisible spear in both hands and lifted it over her shoulder, indicating by the width of her gripped hands just how wide the shaft of the spear should be. I understood perfectly then the shape that the Dreaded Spear had to take. It had been made in a land to the faraway south, in a country of many warlike people. This became the basis for the Sangal sense of style.

We were in an ordinary coffee shop. Suddenly, the decorative plant next to Professor Uehashi flapped in the wind—the wind of Sangal! That's what I felt it was like. As I sat there, I envisioned Tarsan picking up the Dreaded Spear casually, with one hand.

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Traveler of the Void is different from the rest of the *Guardian of the Spirit* series: the perspective shifts to Crown Prince Chagum and the story is somewhat unconnected to previous events. When I first accepted the work of producing art for the work, I was a little overwhelmed at the difficulty of it. I couldn't use a style that would break continuity with the previous books, so I had to internalize the images of the world as it already existed. I didn't know how I would be able to represent Chagum's story using my own pictures.

When I saw Professor Uehashi holding up an invisible spear in front of me that day, all my worries were swept away. I understood Sangal. That was where my connection to the story began. I felt like I was taking the journey there with Chagum. This journey of discovery was

exciting and surprising, and I had no choice but to keep moving forward. The moment I picked up my pen, I departed on that journey.

Every journey needs the image of a home to return to at the end of it. I tried to summon the image of Chagum's homeland, though it didn't come to me before I finished creating the last draft of the art.

***

From the depths of the deep dark sea, I saw a lump of lapis lazuli float up to the very surface of the water. The surface of the sea slowly became the same color as the precious stone; I was caught in another world as if I'd gotten trapped in a net. In that world, I felt the presence of the water dwellers.

Yona Ro Gai...

After finishing work on *Traveler of the Void*, I had a chance to board a boat in my home town and observe the fish and bullrushes beneath the waves for the first time. The rushes grew clumped together and whispered as the transparent blue water made them dance.

Sometimes, Chagum is able to see Nayugu and the many water dwellers that live there. When I looked under the water from the boat, I felt like I could see them floating there, too; flitting to and fro in large groups between the rushes. The image stayed with me well after I read it, and I was a little stunned as I looked down into the water. I blinked and leaned over the handrail to get a better look.

Traveler of the Blue Road also has the sea as a backdrop, and Chagum's journey over the sea by boat will become its most important feature in terms of setting. The details of ships and sailing are mainly confined to Surina's boat in *Traveler of the Void*, but Chagum will eventually cross the Yaltash ocean himself in a ship of medium size. His journey will begin at New Yogo's harbor, but then his ship will sink and he'll jump to one of Sangal's rowboats, encounter a pirate ship, and stop in an enormous, exotic harbor in the south...and then some. Chagum's journey by boat hasn't even started yet.

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I'm holding a note from Professor Uehashi in my hand right now. It says:

- The distance a ship can travel in a day
- How far New Yogo's navy can travel in a day
- How far Sangal's navy can travel in a day (these ships are small, adaptable, and fast)
- How far Senna's ship can travel in a day (Senna is a character in *Traveler of the Blue Road*)
- How many days it would take for the New Yogo navy to reach Kalsh
- How fast could the ox cart carrying the Crown Prince move in a day, taking into account that the driver couldn't hurry or cause his guests discomfort, because that would be disrespectful?

Etc., etc...so many distances and speeds are laid out on this piece of paper.

When it came time to draw the map, I felt a bit like a sea cartographer. The speeds and capabilities of various ships are very different and have evolved across time and across cultures. From fishermen's boats to warships, their shapes reflect the highest beauty and grace of human inventions. I had to use great care in depicting them all: unfinished ships being built, ships burned in war, ships retreating from battle, ships clustered in next to one another at a dock, etc.

And of course, special care was needed for ships traveling over the sea. The surface of the sea took shape using my pens and brushes, and at the same time I felt the sensation of sinking beneath the waves as an excavator looking for things from a lost time and place. It was deeply rewarding work for an illustrator.

In the last scene of *Traveler of the Blue Road*, Chagum jumps into the ocean and swims off alone in the darkness. The moon and spirits from

Nayugu light his way; his shoulders poke up above the surface of the water. This last image was one I had a hard time envisioning at first. Chagum is set between heaven and earth, crossing the sea alone, looking for a way to go home.

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I've said a lot here, but I'd like to line up some of Chagum's more fantastic and wonderful souvenirs from Sangal before wrapping this up.

●･Dried jagou from Kalsh

●･Flower wine from Nourmu (a gift from Roksana)

●･Sangal's strong distilled liquor, saccharon

●･Cham made by Surina

●･Chaz bean jam cakes from Manan's market

Since I ate the jagou from Kalsh, I can't go there ever again...

Satake Miho
July 2, 2007